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Vol. IV. Complete In One Number. Beadle & Adams, Publishers, No. 93 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK. Price, Ten Cents. No. 51

RED ROB, THE BOY ROAD-AGENT. BY OLL COOMES.



RED ROB,

THE BOY ROAD-AGENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAGON TRAIN.

AN emigrant train was creeping slowly and laboriously along the valley of a small tributary of the Rio Grande, toward Conejos, a little Spanish-Mexican town of Southern Colorado.

It was a warm May day; there was no cool shade in which to rest, no breeze to fan the brows of the weary travelers. A cloud of dust hanging upon the air, marked for miles the course they had come, and the village before them, now plainly visible, was the end of their day's journey.

The train consisted of six canvas-covered wagons, with four mules harnessed to each, and an African Jehu mounted upon each near wheeler, with a long whip in his hand and a sleepy look in his eyes.

There were, also, some extra mules and several ponies and saddle-horses, led and driven behind the train.

The party consisted of some twenty persons, including men, women and children; half of all were blacks.

There were three white families, the St. Kenelms, the Boswells, and the Gilbrests, in the party. The blacks were their servants.

The St. Kenelms and Gilbrests were from northern Missouri, the Boswells from southern Iowa—all living near neighbors for many years. The two first-named had once been wealthy, but the war of the States had impoverished them; and, too proud-spirited to sit down and weep over their lost fortunes, they resolved to strike out and retrieve their vanished wealth in the great, wide West, the Boswells accompanying them. Most of the blacks had been slaves of the St. Kenelms and Gilbrests, but after their emancipation they were retained as employees by their old master.

By some means or other our friends had heard that the valleys and mountains of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado were teeming with untold wealth, which awaited only willing hands to convert it into use. And thither were they now going—into the midst of unknown dangers—far from the habitations of civilized men.

A few of this little band claim our notice, the St. Kenelms in particular, of whom there were but two—brother and sister. They were orphans.

Albert St. Kenelm was about eight-and-twenty years of age. He was a noble specimen of physical manhood, with the pleasant, unobtrusive air of a born gentleman. He had been reared in opulence, possessed a good education, and had never known a want that money could supply, until the doom of slavery fell upon their land. However, he was not one of those whose haughty pride and arrogance were characteristics of some of the old families of the south. He was kind, generous and polite. He had been a soldier—fought for his cause in the Confederate army. He enlisted as a private; was disbanded a major.

Octavia St. Kenelm was the opposite of her noble, handsome brother in many respects. She was not over seventeen years of age—a little fairy-like creature, whose dark, dreamy eyes, full of the spirit of mischief, olive complexion, fair face, and wealth of black, silken hair, gave her that rare type of beauty that belongs to Castilian blood.

She was dressed in a traveling-suit that well became her beauty; and during the long journey she had contributed much, by her vivacity of spirit, to the pleasure and enjoyment of the party. Her coming was like a burst of sunshine. She was kind-hearted and generous, like her brother, yet full of innocent mischief and girlish pranks. She was a splendid equestrienne, fearless and daring, often risking dangers from which the more cautious would have shrunk with fear. She was not without her faults, however. Woman-like, she would have her own way. In this she had been encouraged from a little child by old Aunt Shady, the negress, who had been a mother to her for years. She could deny the child nothing, and now the woman would not be denied.

Octavia was entirely heart-free. She bestowed her love upon none but her brother and Aunt Shady; although many

were the youths that had worshiped at the shrine of her beauty.

The Boswell family consisted of six persons—father, mother, and four children. Two of the latter, a boy and a girl, had grown to man and womanhood.

Richard Boswell was a thorough "westerner," and a fine specimen of manhood. He had fought in the northern army against his friend, St. Kenelm; but, now that the war was ended, they laid aside all party and political differences and renewed their old-time friendship.

Maggie Boswell, Richard's sister, was a sweet, modest girl of eighteen, with brown eyes and brown hair, a bright, pleasant and open countenance, a clear, musical voice, and a graceful, sylph-like form. She was the bosom friend of Octavia, and like her in one particular, was full of joy and merriment, but unlike her in another, she loved and was loved. To Albert St. Kenelm had Maggie plighted her heart and hand, though not one of the whole party knew aught of their engagement.

The Gilbrest family was composed of five persons, but with them we have nothing in particular to do at present.

Among the blacks that made up the rest of the party, was old Aunt Shady, the negress who had been in the St. Kenelm family many years. She was over fifty years of age, yet strong and robust. A more kind-hearted, honest, and faithful creature could not be found, and to Albert and Octavia St. Kenelm had she proven herself a devoted friend and servant.

The party was well armed with repeating-rifles of the latest pattern, besides being provided with other implements of war that few emigrants took the precaution or trouble to bring along with them. Fully aware of the dangers that beset their path, they acted upon the principle, that to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Far in advance of the train, the mountains loomed up against the sky like a cloud-bank. Beyond this range was the shrine of their pilgrimage.

As they neared the village of Conejos, the spirits of all began to revive. A hard day's journeying beneath the hot sun and over dry, dusty roads, had quite fatigued both man and beast; but at Conejos they had arranged to stop for a week or so to rest and recuperate before undertaking the journey through the mountains.

The little village of adobes was about five miles away, yet it did not seem to be over half that distance to the travelers. And so Octavia St. Kenelm, fired with her usual spirit of mischief and woman-curiosity, resolved to precede the train into the dull little village, which she declared was sound asleep, at the foot of the mountain.

She fell behind and ordered Jupiter, one of the black servants, to saddle up her pony, a spirited mustang that she had purchased of the Indians with some jewelry. Jupiter, like the rest of the men, was only too eager to obey the mandates of the bright-eyed girl, and at once proceeded to saddle the pony. In a few minutes more Octavia was mounted and galloping past the wagons toward Conejos, her fair face flushed with merriment, while pleasant words and musical peals of laughter burst from her lips as she swept apart each tilted vehicle.

In the foremost wagon was old Aunt Shady, and Octavia wondered if she could get past without the old woman seeing her. But she did not. Aunt Shady was on the look-out, and as the maiden approached one edge of the canvas tilt was suddenly raised, and a round, black face, set in a frame of white woolly hair, peered out.

It was a good-natured looking face, with its big white eyes and double row of pearly teeth, yet it assumed a look of blank astonishment and injured confidence, when Octavia was discovered.

"Bress my soul!" came in measured accents from the old negress' lips.

"Why, Aunt Shady, what's the matter?" asked the mischievous little Octavia, in feigned surprise, as she drew rein alongside of the wagon.

"I is completely 'stonished, I is."

"Indeed, Aunt Shady?"

"Yes, indeedy. Whar under de sun an' shinin' stars are you jist gwine now, Octaby?"

"Going on to Conejos to wake up the citizens and tell them we are coming," was Octavia's reply, spoken with an air of feigned innocence.

"Heabenly Fadder, chile, is you jist gwine crazy? It ar'n't de middle ob de arternoon yit, and de people ob Conejos ar'n't asleep yit, chile, ob course dey lan't."

A merry peal of laughter was Octavia's only response. She gave her pony the rein, and waving her little brown hand to Aunt Shady, galloped away.

The old negress dropped the tilt, straightened up and burst into a fit of hearty laughter that shook her fat sides, until the whole wagon seemed to become inspired and began to shake too.

"I's proud ob dat chile, I is," she finally said to herself, yet aloud. Then as her face assumed an expression of that mild, motherly indignation, she continued: "but, she'll jis' break my ole heart, she will, ef she don't mind what I says. She jist alers would hab her own way; and when I says: 'Octaby, no; Octaby, don't,' out will come dat witchin' little laff, and right down into ole Shady's heart will go dem bright eyes, and to save my soul all I can say is to laff and laff and laff, and when I's done laffin' Octaby's gone."

CHAPTER II.

OCTAVIA'S CAVALIER.

OCTAVIA cantered leisurely along the dim road leading toward Conejos, her young mind free of all but pleasant, girlish thoughts, her young heart untrammelled by the cares and vexations of life.

The road ran along the creek, winding in and out of little mottes of timber, and twisting around the bluffs.

The plain had appeared perfectly level all the way to the village; but, to Octavia's surprise she found it a continuation of gentle swells, and now and then quite a hill. Without halting, however, she galloped on down the valley. The train was hidden from her view now by a point of land projecting into the valley. Before her, a swell in the plain shut out Conejos from her view. To her left was a clump of stunted pines, from the shadows of which a horseman suddenly appeared at a sweeping gallop. He was headed down the valley, coming directly toward her.

For once Octavia felt an involuntary fear steal over her, for she knew not what danger threatened. As the horseman drew nearer, however, she saw that he was a white man, and her fears in a measure subsided.

Reaching the road, the man wheeled his horse into the wagon-track and rode up alongside of the maiden. Lifting his hat, he bowed politely, at the same time saying, in pure English:

"Pardon my intrusion, senorita."

Octavia glanced up at the stranger, whose voice was soft and musical almost as that of a Moorish maid. The next moment a flush suffused her pretty face. Her heart gave a great throb, sending the life-current leaping through her veins. Her eyes were downcast with a childlike embarrassment.

She had been completely surprised. With her sudden fears was associated the face of a rough-bearded man, but the face was that of a boy. The youth could not have been over eighteen years of age, and yet his form was developed into perfect manhood, and his face, although smooth as a maiden's, wore an open, manly look. His eyes were of a dark blue, soft in expression, large and lustrous. Yet there was that in their depths that denoted the courage of a lion, the gentleness of a child; the fierceness of the hawk, the mildness of the dove—a deadly foe, a devoted friend. His features were of a type more remarkable for the strength of character they indicated than for mere beauty.

He was dressed in a style becoming his age and personal appearance. On his head he wore a Mexican sombrero banded with gold. A serape of fine texture and of purple hue, was thrown over his shoulders and fastened together at the throat with a jeweled clasp. This concealed most of his garb, but a breeze drifting up the valley, threw back the edge of the shawl, revealing a dress of the finest texture, and made after the style of a ranchero's, the whole dazzling the eyes of Octavia.

The maiden beheld her ideal of perfect manhood in this dashing young stranger, and in unconscious admiration could but gaze upon his handsome face and form. Nor was this admiration without response, for his very soul seemed exalted by the glance of her dark eyes and the soft music of her voice.

She politely bowed her acceptance of his apology for his intrusion upon her solitude, though a slight tremor in her voice betrayed her inward emotions.

"You ride alone, senorita."

"I did," she replied, with a faint smile; and then, as her womanly curiosity began to assert itself, she asked a question also:

"Do you go to Conejos?" and she touched her pony with the whip to quiet its fears of the prancing horse the youth bestrode.

"I go only to the cross-roads leading to Loma," the boy replied; "then you reside at Conejos?"

"No, sir; I belong to an emigrant train that is coming a short way behind."

Oh, indeed?" he exclaimed; "have you traveled far?"

"From the Missouri river."

"You are risking many dangers in passing through this country. The Arapahoes and Cheyennes are continually roving about over these plains in search of some one to murder, and if they don't find whites they'll turn in and murder one another. Moreover, the white outlaws under the notorious Red Rob keep the whole country, from the headwaters of the Rio Grande to Sante Fe, in a fever of excitement."

"We have been frequently warned of that robber band, but as we have nothing of value in our train that robbers are likely to want, we have no fears."

"I beg to differ with you, my friend," the youth replied; "there is that in your train which would be of precious value to a robber or a Christian."

Octavia reflected. She wondered what he had reference to; moreover, how he knew they had anything at all.

"I am sure I know of nothing, unless it is our faded mules, which we propose to give a week's rest at Conejos."

"It is not your animals, senorita; it is yourself."

Octavia started, and grew red and white by turns. Such a thought had never occurred to her young mind before; and it struck her so suddenly now that a vague fear, such as she had never experienced, stole upon her. She involuntarily glanced back to see how far her friends were away. But they were not yet in sight—Conejos was still hidden from her view, and a sense of her helplessness, in case of danger, made the presence of the young cavalier quite agreeable. But, whatever pleasure or security she felt in his companionship, she was soon compelled to forego it, for, reaching the cross-roads leading to Loma, the youth drew rein, saying:

"Here I leave you, senorita; may you have a pleasant sojourn at Conejos."

"Thank you, sir," Octavia replied, her eyes sparkling; "but to whom am I indebted for this kind wish?"

The youth appeared not to hear her question, but, lifting his sombrero and waving her an adieu, he turned his horse's head toward Loma, and galloped away at a furious speed.

Octavia, who had drawn rein, sat motionless and watched the retreating form in a kind of mental abstraction. A feeling of disquiet or apprehension stole over her young heart, and with it soon came a vague loneliness that seemed to increase with the distance that was momentarily separating her further and further from the handsome, unknown boy.

Forgetful of what she was doing, she continued to gaze after the youth, who, gaining the summit of the ridge, turned in his saddle, and, waving his hand to her, disappeared beyond the hill.

Octavia's heart gave a great bound, for with that act a delicious pleasure filled her breast and banished her unrest. Turning her pony's head, she rode rapidly back toward the train, to inquire into the non-appearance of her friends around the hill. They had had plenty of time in which to make the distance, and she was surprised at their delay. As she rode along, a fearful sound suddenly smote upon her ears. It came from the direction of the train. It was the report of firearms, mingled with yells and shouts. These were succeeded by a thunderous boom that came crashing forth upon the air with more violence than a thunderbolt from heaven. The earth seemed to rock as the waves of the terrific sound rolled along the surface and swelled upon the air, starting a hundred echoes far and near.

"Oh, mercy!" cried Octavia, "that was the cannon; the train has been attacked by Indians or robbers!"

She urged her pony forward.

The prolonged twang of a horn suddenly pealed forth upon the air.

The maiden glanced up the valley toward the north, and to her surprise beheld her late young cavalier galloping along the ridge in the direction of the train. He held a bugle to his lips, ever and anon sending forth a shrill blast upon it.

And still another surprise awaited her.

A band of horsemen burst suddenly from the little grove of pines, out of which the youth had emerged but a few minutes previous. All were armed, for she could see their weapons gleaming in the sunlight.

At a wild, breakneck speed they thundered across the valley and swept up the hill toward that mysterious young knight of the plain.

"Thank God!" burst in accents of joy from Octavia's lips; "they are rangers—they are going to help my friends—and he is their leader!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SOLDIERS' BIVOUAC.

NORTHERN New Mexico!

To this land of Aztec ruins, deserted Zuni cities perched upon lofty summits amid the purple clouds; to this land of ancient volcanoes, of hidden rivers, of yawning chasms and grim, savage forests; to this mysterious and, whose history is written only in cipher, where once burned the fires of the Sun-worshippers, we would now lead the gentle reader.

Under the somber shadows of a pinon forest, in the fertile valley of the San Juan, four men reposed in their bivouac. They were soldiers of the United States, as their uniforms denoted, and belonged to the garrison at Fort Defiance, in Arizona.

The day was nearly spent. The wind drifted down from the cool heights of the distant mountains, and rumbled chill and sullen through the rifts and gorges of the adjacent foothills. Strange voices whispered in still stranger tones among the somber pinons. Buzzards wheeled in the air above the camp with their naked, coral necks outstretched and greedy eyes looking to earth as if in anticipation of an early feast. Coyotes howled in the distance.

The location and its surroundings were well calculated to inspire the deepest melancholy and gloomiest forebodings. And perhaps they did, but not one of that little band of veterans admitted it by word or look. Reclining in positions of ease and repose upon their waterproof blankets, that had come from Navajo looms, they smoked their pipes and conversed with the ease and composure of men accustomed to camp-life.

This little party was under command of James H. Miller, the Indian agent of the Navajoes; and the object which had brought them into the San Juan valley was for furthering the humanitarian Indian policy, of which Mr. Miller was an earnest advocate. The annuities from the government to the Navajoes had been exhausted, and for two years in succession the crops of the semi-barbarous agriculturists had failed. Thus, on the verge of starvation and confined to their reservation, the Indians were on the eve of open hostilities. It required every effort of the agent to prevent it, and in hopes of finding a district more suitable for a reservation and agricultural purposes, he had penetrated into the valley of the San Juan, accompanied by three companions; and it is thus that we find them encamped in that valley, not far from the *Rio del los Pinos*.

"I feel thankful to heaven," Mr. Miller finally remarked, starting from his thoughts, "that this expedition was undertaken."

"You think then this valley is sufficiently fertile for the maintenance of the tribe, do you?" asked Ben Thomas.

"I do. Water in this arid, volcanic land is the greatest consideration, and the San Juan and its series of tributaries will furnish this in abundance for irrigation."

"But it seems that rivers in this country go dry or sink beneath the earth's surface, and the San Juan may also disappear."

"I think it has been dry at some remote period of the past," said Jesus Alviso, the Mexican interpreter.

"What proof have you of this, Alviso?" asked the Indian agent.

"The deserted pueblos and ruined *acequias*, senor."

"I can not think so, Alviso. The formation of this valley leads me to a different opinion."

"Then why was this valley deserted? We have ample evidence of its having once been densely populated."

"I know it, and can not account for its desertion upon any other theory than that the Apaches, those ancient foes of the Navajoes, overran the valley at some remote period of the past. This country is an enigma to the antiquarian. It has been the scene of local strife and bloodshed ever since the

Spanish invaders endeavored to supplant the old Mexic faith. The wrath of God seems to have fallen upon this country. It is the Egypt of the New World, for the 'Seven cities of the Cibolas,' on the de Chaco river, and the fortified city of the Aztecs, Quivira, on the San Juan, answer to the once populous cities of Babylon and Nineveh. We have evidence of a superior race of people having once dwelt here. Their ruined cities attest this. But now it has become almost a desert. A few roving bands of Indians, white robbers, and now and then a few treasure-hunters, like Bedouins, rove about over the country. This region is undoubtedly rich in mineral deposits, and it's my opinion that, if the Indian Appropriation Bill now pending in Congress, passes, there will be a great rush to this land of ruins."

"In which case troubles will multiply," said Ben Thomas. "With the Mexican outlaws to the south of us, the Utes and Mormons on the west, and a horde of lawless treasure-seekers pouring in from all quarters, what will be the result?"

"War, robbery and crime," responded Alviso.

"I apprehend no trouble from the Utes," said Miller.

"Do not trust them, senor. They appear friendly, but even at this moment they may be in this valley."

The man's words seemed prophetic.

"Well," said Mr. Miller, starting to his feet, "I must not neglect the view from the summit of yonder cliff."

He took a small field-glass from among his effects, and, accompanied by Alviso, started toward the hill, across a beautiful valley. The pinons swayed gently above them, the green grass rustled to their hasty footsteps. Soon they reached the foot of the bluff—a spur of the San Juan mountain—and with light footsteps started up the steep acclivity. They soon gained the towering summit and turned their faces westward.

The sun was just sinking behind a distant range of hills. The mountain tops around them seemed ablaze with fire—altars upon which burned the eternal fires of the Montezumas. The valley and forest lay brooding in death-like shadows beneath them.

With his glass the agent swept the surrounding hills, valleys and mountains. Far away upon a lofty summit to the westward he descried the gray outlines of one of those ancient ruined cities. It loomed up against the sky grim and ghostly.

For a moment Miller studied the old remains with meditative silence; then he turned his glass upon another object to which his attention had been called by his companion. He scanned it for a moment, then exclaimed:

"That beats me, Alviso."

It was a smoke, curling upward in a spiral column in the vicinity of the ruins of Quivira.

"That proves that we are not the only persons in this vicinity."

"To be sure it does, senor," replied Alviso.

"Do you think it is from an Indian camp?"

"No; it's too bold for that. I'll tell you my opinion, senor."

"Well?"

"You remember of hearing of a party of emigrants that passed through Santa Fe, about two years ago?"

"Yes; they say they acted queer. They were called Silent Tongues on account of their reticence as to their destination. All at once they disappeared. Their wagons were tracked to the old Moqui towns, where all traces of them vanished."

"That's the story, senor; and now—"

"Well?"

"I'll risk a doubloon on that smoke curling up from the retreat of the Silent Tongues."

"We'll see to-morrow," said Miller, and turning he led the way down the cliff and back to camp through the gathering shadows of twilight.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE MINERS.

WHEN Miller and his companion reached camp they found their comrades and supper awaiting them.

Seating themselves upon the sward the four began their repast. While thus engaged, the agent made known his discovery, and commented upon the same.

The sound of horses' hoofs and the jingle of trappings suddenly arrested their attention. Mechanically they drew their revolvers as they started and gazed uneasily around.

Three horsemen emerged from the shadows of the woods and drew rein.

One familiar with a mining district would at once have pronounced the trio a party of miners. They were mounted on strong-limbed, yet faded-looking ponies; and were provided with huge packs, from which protruded the handles of picks and spades and other evidences of their being treasure-hunters on a prospecting tour through the country. They were also well armed. Coming from the direction of the Quivira ruins, there was nothing in their looks to engender distrust in the minds of the soldiers. Though rudely dressed, the open, frank expression in each face dispelled all apprehension. Their coming broke the savage monotony of the camp, and the quartette hailed their presence with a feeling akin to pleasure.

These three men were entirely different so far as age and personal appearances went. The eldest must have been fifty years or more of age. He was a tall, powerful man, straight and erect, with a proud, martial bearing. His features wore a pleasant, yet stern and resolute expression that was indicative of great decision of character. His eyes were of a dark gray, with that peculiarity of expression in them that one often sees in those of a docile lion. His face was covered with a ponderous white beard that gave him a still more venerable and imposing look.

This man was Basil Walraymond.

The next man in point of years was Nathan Wolfe. He was about forty years of age, and was a splendid specimen of the physical man, with a rough, bearded face, upon whose features cropped out the predominant traits of the person's character.

The third was a young man of perhaps five-and-twenty years. A little above the medium height, he was possessed of the form of an athlete and the face of an Adonis. His hair, which was a dark-brown color, was cropped closely to his head. A heavy mustache, of the same color as his hair, shaded an expressive mouth, and lent an additional look of strength to his features and of firmness to his character. In his dark-blue eyes burned the luster of health, the fire of impetuous youth and the spirit of adventure. His cheeks were bronzed, yet this rather served to strengthen his manly beauty. His voice was clear and full—almost musical.

This was Asa Sheridan.

All three were dressed in buck-skin with woolen undershirts. All wore heavy boots with jingling spurs at the heels. Broad-brimmed hats covered each head. A leather belt encircled each waist, and in this belt were a pair of revolvers and a murderous-looking knife. A handsome rifle was swung at the back of each, by means of a strap passing over the left shoulder and under the right arm.

A month previous these three were strangers. By chance they had been thrown together at Santa Fe. Their acquaintance ripened into mutual friendship, and then their friendship developed itself into a spirit of adventure. This finally carried them on a prospecting tour into northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

The profession and character of each one before their meeting at Santa Fe seemed of little concern to the others, for they made no inquiry of one and another of anything extending beyond their first meeting. They asked for no papers of recommendation, of moral character or social standing. On the border all kinds of characters meet—good, bad and indifferent—many of them to begin life anew; and so the past is usually considered beyond the beginning, as it were, and to ask a man for a history of himself would be almost as absurd as to ask a child for its history before it existed.

The three were friends, that was certain. They were true to each other; that had been tested in more than one difficulty with the Arapahoes and Apaches.

"A military camp, by Jove!" cried young Sheridan, as he caught sight of the soldiers' uniform in the dim glow of the camp-fire, and reined in his horse within a rod of the camp.

"Yes, on a small scale," replied Miller, advancing.

Sheridan dismounted and saluted—his companions following his example.

"From Fort Wingate? or Defiance?"

"Defiance," responded Miller. "Judging from appearances you are miners, and as it is camping time, I would just say that the hospitality of the San Juan valley and our bivouac is at your service."

"Thank you, sir," said the old man, in a bluff, yet kindly tone.

It required but a few minutes to unpack their animals and lariat them out to grass along with the soldiers' horses.

This done, the three new-comers brought out their supply of dried venison, roasted bear-meat and hard biscuit, and took supper along with their newly-made acquaintances.

"It is a blessed relief," said Basil Walraymond, "to meet white men with white hearts in this country. What are you doing here, anyhow, soldiers?"

"Looking up a new agency for the Navajoes," replied Miller; "and you—"

"We are hunting gold and silver and diamonds," interrupted the mysterious old man of stone, anticipating Miller's question.

"With what success, senor?" asked Alviso.

The old man bent his fierce look upon Alviso, and his immobile face seemed to wear a faint smile of scorn.

"I'd be a fool to tell you," he responded; then his voice softened, and he continued: "but you are soldiers. You have no time to hunt treasure, so we need have no fears of you jumping our claims. The fact of it is, however, we have no gold, no silver, no diamonds; but we have found rubies, turquoises and garnets of great value. But you needn't murder us for them, for they are *cached* a hundred miles from here," and the speaker broke off into a fit of silent, good-natured laughter.

"Did you come from the direction of Quivira ruins?" Mr. Miller asked.

"Not far in that direction. We've just returned from Colorado. We saw your smoke, and bent our course this way. We go to the ruins to-morrow," replied the old man.

"I saw a smoke in the direction of the ruins a few minutes ago. There must be a settlement down there, or else—"

"Do you think so, commandant?" asked Walraymond, betraying some sudden emotion.

"It may be a party of hunters or Indians, or miners like yourselves," continued the agent. "A party of emigrants passed northward through Santa Fe a year or two ago, and nothing has been heard of them since."

"Were there any women with them?" asked the old man.

"Yes, there were two or three women. The party acted very queer and mysterious, some thought; but since I saw that smoke off westward, I am inclined to believe those Silent Tongues, as they were called, have crept away into this deserted valley and taken up their abode. They might have found a rich gold mine, and are working it secretly; or they may be one of those bands of outlaws that infest the mountains."

Basil Walraymond glared at Miller while he was speaking with a savage yet thoughtful look in his dark gray eyes. Then he bent his gaze upon the ground, stroked his long, hoary beard fiercely, and then resumed his eating.

The old man was agitated, and the soldiers were somewhat puzzled by his strong emotions; and were even surprised at the manner in which his own companions regarded him. He seemed to puzzle them all—a living enigma.

Supper was concluded in silence.

By this time darkness had set in. The coyotes had begun their demoniac chatter—the forest its nocturnal moan. The cool breeze from the mountains swept chill and sad down the valley. The dark brow of the San Juan frowned ominously down upon the bivouac.

The fire was replenished with fuel. The blaze leaped upward and threw its ruddy light over the rough, bearded faces around it. Millions of sparks drifted into the purple dome of darkness above. Shadows grim and grotesque danced in and out of the impenetrable wall of gloom around them as the flames rose and fell with the currents of air.

Silence, deep and profound, came over the party. The chill air had first checked that spontaneous flow of genial spirits that characterized most of the party. And now the warm glow of the fire being felt through every form, it carried them back to the home fireside. It recalled many pleasant thoughts, and many bitter ones, no doubt. Evening's home pleasures are associated with the warm, cheery glow of a fire. The faces we knew in youth; faces we know in manhood; faces that are gone from our view forever; faces that were wont to grow bright at our coming—all appear before the mental vision in the glowing flame. The fireside is a powerful agent. It conjures up a thousand vague images; it resurrects long-buried thoughts, oft-times opening anew old wounds, or reviving sad, desponding spirits. And it must have wrought its mysterious influence upon Basil Walraymond, for at times a faint smile would overspread his stern, bearded face and light up the eyes; then would follow a nervous twitching of the facial muscles, and a quivering of the eyelids, that told of some bitter, agonizing thoughts tugging at his heart-strings.

None watched this mysterious old man as did Asa Sheridan. Some strange affinity seemed to have drawn the old stranger into his heart. Meanwhile young Sheridan was not aware that he had become the central figure of other eyes. The soldiers regarded him with even more interest than the old man—Alviso with evident distrust.

There was an air of reckless abandon about the youth that seemed to possess some irresistible power of magnetic attraction—something that attracted and yet repelled—something to admire and at the same time fear.

After a few minutes' silence, the Mexican took a diary and pencil from an inner pocket. Upon the fly-leaf of the book he wrote a name. He then passed the memoranda to Miller, in such an indifferent manner as not to attract attention, at the same time nodding in a significant manner at Sheridan, who sat with his back toward him.

The agent glanced at the writing in the book and read that terrible name:

"Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent!"

CHAPTER V.

THE CENTAUR.

THE idea of Asa Sheridan, the miner, being Red Rob seemed preposterous; and yet Alviso's announcement fell like a lightning's bolt upon the agent. He glanced at the interpreter, then at the unsuspecting object of his emotions, seeming totally undecided as to what course he should pursue. His first impulse, however, was to take advantage of the Mexican's revelation and secure the notorious young outlaw. But a second thought dismissed the first. He passed the book back to Alviso and consulted his thoughts.

Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent, had, for two years, been a terror to New Mexico; and his name was spoken in fear by some, in praise by others. He had been termed a modern Claude Duval with but a single exception, that of his age. Red Rob had never been represented over eighteen years of age; although none of his victims could be found that had ever seen his face; he always went in disguise.

It was the rich that feared him, for the poor had nothing that he wanted, and so they rested in comparative ease. Deeds of heroism, daring adventure, acts of kindness to emigrant parties, had won for him a kind of a terrible fascination.

If Sheridan was Red Rob, Miller could see no reason why he was called the Boy Road-agent, for he was a man in years. This gave him reason to believe that Alviso was mistaken in the man's identity; and yet, there were hopes of his being correct, for the Mexican was acquainted with all the different characters in the territory.

Heretofore all attempts to capture the young mountain bandit had proved fruitless. Miller knew this; and, as he gazed upon the handsome face and athletic form of young Sheridan, and measured his probable strength, he wondered what success would attend an attempt to arrest him, and whether or not the old man Walraymond and Nathan Wolfe were his companions in outlawry.

The rustle of a bush and the soft, light tread of hooved feet not far away, arrested the agent's attention. In an instant every one of the group turned in the direction of the sound to behold a human face peering at them over a low bush. It was a man's face—aged and wrinkled, and covered with an immense yellow beard, fully two feet in length. The hair was also long, grizzled and disheveled. Neither hat nor cap was upon his head. There was a vacant expression in the great bearded face, a wild, unearthly glare in the dark, sunken eyes.

The man stood about two rods away, where the extremity of the light, blended with the shadows, created a dim twilight. His body was concealed behind a bush, and, judging by the height of this, he was of low stature. For several moments the party regarded the stranger with a look of silent awe.

Nathan Wolfe seemed more agitated than any. He seemed to recognize the countenance.

Miller, first to break the silence, cried: "Who comes there?"

The man made no response, but turning his head, glanced from side to side, then resumed his vacant stare toward the fire.

The agent challenged him again, but no response.

Then Miller drew his revolver. "Answer, or I'll fire," and he raised the weapon.

Still no response from the stony-faced intruder.

The agent pressed the trigger and the report of his pistol crashed through the night. He did not aim at the man's head, but above it, hoping to frighten him and elicit a response.

Scarcely had the reverberations of the pistol-shot started, the forest echoes, ere the form of an animal sprung from behind the very bush where the man stood, and stopped within the full glare of the light.

An exclamation of involuntary horror burst from every lip. An awful apparition stood before them.

Upon the body of the animal was a human head and face!—the same bearded face that had stared at them over the bush!

There was no doubting the evidence of their eyes—it was no delusion—no mental phantom, but a living, moving animal, with the head and face of a man!

It stood within the full glow of the camp-fire and glared at them.

Every man recoiled with an involuntary shudder of vague horror. The face of the Mexican became ghastly, and his teeth chattered as with an ague fit.

"Ay, señor!" he gasped, seizing Miller by the arm, while his staring eyes were fixed upon the unnatural monster. "It is it, señor—the devil—Centaur—half-human, half-beast!"

There was no reply. Every eye was still fixed upon the creature, whose gaze seemed possessed of a diabolical fascination—a fascination that they could not repel.

However preposterous it seemed to them, there was no denying the living fact. The proof was the creature itself—there before them, a terrible living horror—the form of a deer, with a human face and head. The long, yellow beard hung low upon the breast, and the long, grizzled hair straggled in disordered masses about the neck; while those awful, stony-looking eyes, glaring out at them from beneath their massive brows in the wavering, garish light, seemed to dart rays of hellish enchantment into the souls of the astonished men.

A raven suddenly croaked near by. It broke the awful spell, and the monster turned its bearded face and bounded away into the gloom.

Half a minute had seemed an hour.

The monster left the party speechless. Walraymond was the first to speak.

"Age of wonders—monsters!"

He spoke in a calm, natural tone.

"Yes, it beats me—it beats all of us," said the Indian agent.

"Certainly, certainly," mused Walraymond, reflectively. "Surely we are not living in the age of fable—centuries in advance of time. Surely that mass rising yonder into the clouds cannot be old Mount Olympus."

"No, by heavens, Walraymond!" exclaimed young Sheridan, whose clear, metallic voice dispelled the silent terror left hanging over the camp; "you are living in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and seventy-one."

Walraymond turned to Miller and said:

"What do you understand by that apparition, commandant?"

"It's a mystery."

"Your opinion, then?"

"I saw the body of an animal, not unlike that of a deer, with a human head—I saw those as plain as I see you. This is all; I can form no idea in regard to it—it's a mystery."

"It's as I tell you, señor. It's a Centaur. They have dwelt in the valley of the *del los Pinos* these many, many centuries."

The Mexican was superstitious. He spoke in a solemn, earnest tone—almost fiercely.

Miller recalled the many strange stories he had heard of this mysterious land—stories which had come down through centuries in traditions. He remembered hearing an old Navajo tell something of a strange race of people with bodies like animals, that dwelt in the valley of some of the San Juan tributaries; but he accepted the story as one of the legends of the country, and thought no more about it until that moment.

James Miller was an old soldier, a man of education, and one of the last to give credence to stories that find their origin in superstition. But what was he to believe now?—how was he to dispose of the monster? He had seen it move,

and knew it was no optical delusion—nothing spiritual, but a tangible object of the material world. Perhaps he was in a frame of mind that was not calculated to repel the conviction forced so suddenly upon him. The deep solitude of the place, the gloom of night, the weird sounds coming, as it were, from out the realms of Nowhere, and the revelation that Alviso had just made concerning Sheridan—all these, perhaps, contributed in overcoming his incredulities of all appertaining to the mysterious. Nothing begets uneasiness and vague, restless fear so quick as the depressing influence of gloom and solitude, and the stoutest heart and bravest mind can no more dispel them from the breast than they can the shadows of night from around them. There is an awful resemblance between death and darkness. The horrors of the one are in the shadows of the other.

"And now your opinion, Walraymond?" the agent said, turning to the old man.

"It must be as your Mexican friend says. Nothing under the sun is impossible, especially in New Mexico. Yes, sir, seeing a thing should be all the evidence wanted. No one can see for another as well as he can for himself. But, after all, the creature seemed harmless."

"It is harmless," replied Nathan Wolfe, terribly agitated, and apparently troubled.

"Senor," said Alviso, "do not be deceived in the Centaur. These deserted valleys and pueblos bear the hoof-prints of those ancient demons—are mute witnesses of the bloody work of the Centaurs."

Miller saw that the unnatural fear which leads to superstition was getting the better of himself and men, and so he at once dismissed the subject; and, as a preclusion to further excitement, wrapped his blanket around him and lay down to rest, pillowing his head in the hollow of his saddle.

A soldier and one of the miners were detailed to take the first watch. The rest of the party followed the agent's example, and were soon asleep on the ground.

The camp-fire burned low. The coyotes chattered nearer—the pinons rustled softly in the night wind. The watchers, stationed under the darkness, kept their silent ward.

The near crack of rifles, the whiz of bullets and "whirr" of arrows suddenly told them of lurking dangers. The sleepers all started from their sleep, but Agent Miller. He slept on.

Every man grasped his rifle, expecting an attack. But they were happily disappointed. No foes appeared. Alviso crept away into the shadows to reconnoiter.

Ben Thomas turned to Miller, who still slept on. Thomas spoke to him, but he stirred not. He bent over him and shook him—lightly at first, then vigorously. Still he could not rouse the sleeper.

Thomas drew aside the blanket from the agent's face, upon which the light now shone. He was lying upon his left side. His eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted and wreathed in a faint smile that seemed the expression of a pleasant dream. A dark line ran diagonally across the man's brow. Thomas looked closer, and saw it was the track of blood! Then he started up and cried out:

"My God, Miller is dead!"

And he spoke the truth. A bullet of one of the unseen foes had struck the agent on the top of the head, passed downward behind the eye, producing instant death. He had not moved a muscle nor uttered a word.*

A gloom darker than the shades of night fell upon the party. The death of the agent was a terrible blow to his friends and country. And to still add to this loss and sad state of affairs, Alviso returned to camp with the startling information that a large party of Utes was in the valley—that they had stolen every animal but a single one, and that to stay there would be to court certain death.

Upon a hasty consultation, it was decided to abandon the camp at once. A messenger was dispatched on the only remaining horse to Fort Defiance, with the news of Miller's death.

Under the somber pinons, where the San Juan Mountains keep their eternal watch, James H. Miller, the soldier and Christian, was laid to rest. A grave had been hollowed out with one of the miners' spades, the body wrapped in a blanket and lowered into the grave.

When the last shovelful of dirt was placed over the dead, all turned toward Walraymond, who had unassumingly taken charge of the burial. The glare of a pine torch lit up the scene—the mound of fresh earth, the silent figures around it,

* A real incident.

their faces looking ghostly in the dim, uncertain glow of the wavering light, and the most conspicuous of all, the majestic form of Basil Walraymond, with bared head, and his long, venerable beard looking hoary in the dusky shadows.

A dead calm fell upon the little party. The old man lifted his eyes toward heaven—his lips moved—he was praying. His voice was low and tremulous at first, but finally swelled out clear and strong and solemn as the tones of a funeral bell. His whole frame shook with the intensity of his emotions, as, with all the fervency of his great, noble soul, he lifted his voice to heaven in behalf of the soul of the departed man.

It was a wild, weird and solemn scene.

Asa Sheridan watched and listened in breathless silence, his whole soul seemingly absorbed by the solemn words of the speaker. A mist gathered over his eyes, and something came up in his throat and almost choked him. Was it remorse? Did the humble supplication of the old man recall something of the forgotten past?—reach his heart?

When Walraymond had concluded his prayer, Sheridan turned to Wolfe and said, in a low tone:

"Strange, mysterious, noble old man! From whence came he?—who is he?—what is he? Wolfe, I'd give all the wealth of New Mexico, if I possessed it, for answers to these questions."

"Soldiers, what do you propose to do now?"

It was the old man who spoke, in his full, rich tone.

"We will have to return to the fort;—but you?"

"I shall follow those Indians."

"I, too," said Sheridan.

"And I," added Wolfe.

"Our time is not our own," said Ben Thomas. "It belongs to our country. But for this we would accompany you."

"Do your duty, soldiers," said the old man, solemnly.

"We may meet again some time, so good-by."

He shook hands with the soldiers, took up his rifle and turned to leave.

The wind stirred the branches above; the leaves rustled mournfully.

Then the wall of darkness around them seemed to give birth to a hundred spirits of evil. A hundred shadowy figures floated out of the gloom into the light of the camp fire.

They were savages. The war-whoop of the Utes burst upon the silent night—echoed and re-echoed among the mountain caverns, and rolled along in quavering intonation through the valley.

Sheridan, Wolfe and the soldiers fled into the forest gloom. Basil Walraymond alone remained to contend with the savage horde. His giant form, rendered conspicuous by his white beard and gray hair, towered above the seething mass around him—a grand, majestic soul, struggling with the legions of darkness.

He discharged his rifle at the foremost Indian. The red-skin fell dead. Then he clubbed his weapon. With the first blow the stock was shattered, but it left him with a deadlier missile—the heavy iron barrel, which crushed and tore its way through the ranks of the foe. The old man stood his ground. The savages fell away before him. He was a pivot around which the deadly gun-barrel swept like an iron arm whirled by some irresistible power.

From the darkness of the woods, young Sheridan and Nathan Wolfe saw the danger of their old friend, the heroic, mysterious Basil Walraymond.

They loved the old man—they resolved he should not fall alone. They rushed back, and side by side with him, fought the yelling, frenzied horde.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS RESCUERS.

OCTAVIA WAS scarcely out of hailing distance of the train, when the restless eyes of her brother, Major St. Kenelm, discovered a dark cloud rise suddenly upon the northern horizon and sweep along the plain. He knew at once it was not a storm-cloud, but a cloud surcharged with more deadly elements; and as it approached, it gradually resolved itself into distinct objects—each object a horse and rider. The riders were all readily recognized as Indians. The emigrants could see their plumes swaying in the breeze about their heads, and their polished spear-heads flashing in the sun.

"They are Arapahoes, boys," said young Boswell, who had brought a field-glass to bear upon the moving mass "look, major, for yourself."

St. Kenelm took the glass, and having scanned the party for a moment, exclaimed:

"Danger is coming, friends—perhaps death! Every man to his post—we will have to fight! Ho, teamsters! throw your wagons into a square, that we may have a temporary barricade, and secure your animals. Be quick, men, for Heaven's sake! This way, two of you; help me man the Silent Friend!"

Two men followed him to the rear wagon, which, being covered like the others, no one would have guessed was an artillery-wagon. But such was the case. The party had improvised a gun-carriage out of a common wagon, and mounted a small brass howitzer upon it. The weapon had been kept concealed by the tilt, which was kept securely closed all around. It was spoken of only as the "Silent Friend."

The major and his two friends entered the inclosed gun-carriage, unloosened the canvas so as to be thrown aside in an instant, and then loaded the gun with a solid shot.

Major St. Kenelm had seen service as an artilleryist, and had no doubt of his ability to handle the gun with precision.

"Now let them venture within five hundred yards," he said, calmly.

"But, major, look off *here*!" cried Harry Gilbrest, running up in great excitement; "there comes another party of horsemen from the south."

The gunners looked in the direction indicated; and, sure enough, saw another party of horsemen sweeping toward them. They were about the same distance away that the other party was. St. Kenelm examined them with the glass.

"Boys, we are doomed! They are Kiowas!"

He spoke in a deep, husky tone.

By this time the mules and horses had been secured. The women were huddled together behind the barricade of wagons, trembling with a violent terror.

Every man and boy, black and white, stood with rifle in hand ready for the affray. A pallor was upon each face, but it was that pallor with which the brave meet death. A fierce determination burned in each eye.

"The Arapahoes are the strongest," said St. Kenelm; "perhaps one volley from our rifles, followed by one shot from the cannon, will check their advance. We can then meet the Kiowas with our rifles and a discharge of grape."

In the mean time great excitement prevailed among the women. The absence of Octavia was known to all, and the general belief that she was in imminent danger caused great uneasiness. Old Aunt Shady was nearly distracted, and refused, like Rachel of old, to be comforted.

"Do not grieve, Aunt Shady," said the kind-hearted Maggie Boswell. "Octavia may be the only one of us that'll escape."

"Oh, Miss Maggie, I jis' know she'll be murdered an' den killed by dem awful Ingings!" wailed the old negress. "If we's killed, den de poor young t'ing 'll be wusser off dan eber. Oh, my Octaby! who'd take keer ob her den? Oh, honey! dis world's jis' full ob sin blacker dan my face. It'll break my heart—I jis' can't stand it—oh, Lor', I'll jis' diel."

And her fat form shook like an aspen under the intensity of her grief.

"But, Aunt Shady," persisted Maggie, with tears in her eyes, "Octavia may be—"

"Hush, chile—honey, dear!" interrupted the old negress; "ole Shady habent libed dis fifty year fur nuffin'. She know what danger am—she see de awful war in de Souf—she see'd— Oh, Lor', save my soul!"

The last exclamation was occasioned by the sudden, thunderous crash of the cannon, that shook the earth till Aunt Shady fairly bounced. She stuffed her chubby fingers into her ears, and looking up at her friends with a lugubrious wail, cried out:

"Children, let's pray."

The shot fired at the approaching Arapahoes was not without effect. It plowed its way through the ranks of the foe, filling them with terror and consternation. This was a reception they had never expected to meet with from an emigrant train. Had they known that the party possessed a cannon, it is doubtful whether they would have made the attack; for, of all things, the Indian has the greatest terror of a cannon.

The shot put a check to the advance of the Arapahoes, but the Kiowas kept straight on toward the train, as if exerting every effort to reach it in advance of the Arapahoes.

The emigrants held their fire until the Kiowas were within fifty paces, then the cannon belched forth its leaden hail and was succeeded by volley after volley, in rapid succession, by the deadly Winchesters. The carnage was fearful; more than a score of savages were unhorsed. A dozen ponies dashed wildly in every direction over the plain—some with reeling, tottering riders, others riderless entirely.

The animals of several of the Kiowas became unmanageable with affright, and dashed up to the very muzzles of the repeaters that were still pouring forth an almost continual stream of fire and lead.

The Arapahoes saw this fearless movement of their neighbors, and supposing it was made out of sheer bravery, determined not to be outdone by them, and rallying, bore down again to the scene of conflict.

This encouraged the Kiowas, who, maddened by their terrible loss, charged the emigrants, with all the savage vengeance of their souls thrown into their unearthly yells. But our friends were ready for this combined onset. The cannon, loaded almost to the muzzle, belched across the plain, and was immediately followed by the discharge of the rifles.

The ranks of the foe were nearly swept away. The slaughter of men and horses was frightful; but the survivors pressed on and drove the gunners from the cannon—back inside of their frail defense of wagons.

Yells of triumph now issued from the red-skins' lips, for, although dearly purchased, victory seemed within their grasp.

A scene that defies description now followed the first advantage of the foe. Above the tumult of the battle rose the cries and screams of the terrified women, the wild braying of the frightened mules, and the shouts of the defenders.

But, suddenly, above the din of all, the wild clangor of a horn rung out, and a score of white horsemen charged like madmen upon the savages and put them to rout.

And the emigrant train was saved!

Away over the plains in all directions scattered the defeated savages in the wildest disorder, and on in swift pursuit swept the white horsemen, the clangor of the horn, the report of pistols and the shouts of the men ringing out in triumph on the air.

Eagerly our friends watched the wild pursuit, and anxiously they awaited the return of those unknown men, to whom they were indebted for their lives and all they possessed. But they waited in vain. The mysterious horsemen swept away out of sight and were seen no more.

Fearful as the conflict had been, and great as was the savages' loss, the victory of our friends was almost bloodless and without loss. Two men only had been wounded, but one of these severely; and three mules had broken from the corral and escaped.

The greatest fears of Octavia's safety were now entertained. A large number of the defeated red-skins had fled toward Conejos, and as they were not being pursued, they would in all probability overtake the maiden.

They dare not weaken the defensive force of the train by sending out men in search of her. They were afraid the Indians might rally and renew the attack, and between the two extremities, moments of agonizing suspense and fear held the party inactive.

Old Aunt Shady waddled to and fro, wringing her hands in the bitterest despair and bewailing the unknown fate of her young mistress.

A riderless pony, with smoking flanks and steaming sides, suddenly dashed up the road from the direction of Conejos.

All recognized the animal—it was Octavia's.

Sadness and deepest sorrow fell upon every heart.

What was to be done? Evening was coming on, and Conejos was fully four miles away, now lost in the shadows of the grim old mountain beyond.

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW CHARACTER ON THE STAGE.

OCTAVIA ST. KENELM was in peril. The very danger which she might have escaped and which threatened her friends, befell her. She rode back until the train was in sight, and was a witness to the conflict. She saw the savages charging down upon

her friends. She saw the cannon belch its death-hail across the plain. She heard the yells of the savages and the shouts of her friends. Still she kept on. In the awful tumult of battle there was some horrible fascination that led her on closer and closer to the train. Her attention was divided between the conflict and that little band of horsemen sweeping across the plain. She was satisfied that they were rangers, and that that gallant, handsome boy was their leader. She could see him at their head—she saw him sweep down upon the red-skins and put them to flight. Then her young heart throbbed with the wildest joy, and its love went out in silent admiration and thanks for the noble deed of the noble boy and his followers.

Octavia's eyes swam in a mist of tears as she watched the flying Indians and pursuing rangers; and when they at last singled out one form among the many, they followed it so closely that she failed to notice the approach of two savages—a Kiowa and Arapaho—until escape was impossible.

The Arapaho dashed alongside of her and seized her pony's reins, while the Kiowa rode up, and seizing the terrified girl around the waist, dragged her from her animal's back, and threw her across the withers of his own in front of him.

Octavia's pony became so unmanageable that the Arapaho was compelled to release his hold, when it dashed away down the road.

The two Indians turned southward and galloped away with their fair, helpless captive. Both were young men, and chiefs at that. They were the leaders of the defeated bands then flying in every direction across the plain.

They rode on in silence for nearly a mile, when they were joined by several warriors—about an equal number of each tribe. Among the Kiowas was a white renegade.

The warriors were highly elated over their leaders' success in capturing the beautiful girl. It compensated them, in a measure, for their recent terrible loss; yet these warriors little dreamed of the struggle going on in each chieftain's breast.

The whole party moved on at a slow, wearisome gallop, and when they had journeyed something near five miles, it became necessary for them to halt and rest their overtaxed animals.

Octavia was lifted to the ground, but she was so weak and terrified that she could not stand without support. So a blanket was placed upon the sward, and she sat down upon it and burst into tears. For the first time in her young and happy life her heart was bowed in trouble and fear.

The young Kiowa chief stood upon one side of her with folded arms, gazing upon her with that pride so thoroughly characteristic of the savage. The Arapaho stood on the other side, looking none the less proud of the lovely prize.

At length the "pent-up Utica" that had been surging in these barbarians' breasts burst forth.

"The dark-eyed maiden will be a beautiful ornament in Long Lance's lodge."

It was the Kiowa who spoke.

"But that will do the lodge of Red Hawk no good," said the Arapaho, manifesting a disposition to dispute the Kiowa's right to the maiden.

"When the Kiowas and the Araphoes go on the war-path together, the Kiowas do not claim the scalps the Araphoes take."

"The Kiowa chief speaks the truth, and the white maiden is Red Hawk's captive. He was the first to catch her pony."

"And Long Lance captured the maiden. The pony is the Arapaho's, the maiden the Kiowa's," replied the sagacious Long Lance.

"When the Arapaho shoots an enemy, does the Kiowa steal the scalp?"

This retort was as stinging as it was significant, and the eyes of the young Arapaho blazed as he spoke. The spirit of the Kiowa was fired by the cutting sarcasm of his friend, and the two were as ready to fight each other as they had been to fight the whites a few hours previous. In fact, it was evident now that nothing but a conflict would decide the claim to the maiden; and if the dispute was forced to this extremity the fight would be a bloody and desperate one; or, at worst, the friends of each would participate, and these were about equal in point of numbers.

The prize was not likely to be yielded without a struggle, and the dispute waxed warm between the young chiefs. Hot words were flung at each other, and sinister eyes blazed with a consuming fire of resentment.

Octavia sat shivering with fear. She could not understand what the disputants said, but their violent gestures, blazing eyes and fierce, contorted faces told her that something terrible was about to occur. She watched the movements of the two chiefs, and when at length one of them drew his tomahawk, she felt certain it was to be buried in her brain. But, when she saw the white renegade hitherto spoken of, step between the enraged chiefs, something of the real truth dawned upon her, and a fearful load was lifted from her heart. She now became satisfied that the white man was endeavoring to effect a bloodless adjustment of the dispute, and by the gradual contraction of the scowls of rage and the terrible blaze of the eyes, she knew that he would succeed.

The chiefs sheathed their weapons and their men fell back.

Then the renegade turned to Octavia and explained the situation to her; informing her that, to avert an appeal to arms, the chiefs had, at his suggestion, agreed to let the maiden decide the question herself: that is, say which one she considered her captor.

"Between two evils of equal magnitude there is no choice," was the maiden's cool reply. "The lamb can certainly have no choice as to which wolf devours it."

"I know," replied the renegade, "but you'd better say which, and save a bloody muss."

"You have my decision—both are demons at heart," she replied, a little fiercely.

The outlaw turned to the young chiefs and explained her decision, when the old fire at once began to blaze up in their eyes.

"See here, red skins," said the renegade, who really desired to avoid a conflict, "the horses of the chiefs are strong and swift; let their speed determine the question and stop this fussin'. Do you see that pine out yander?"

He pointed out a tree that stood about a hundred rods south of them on the level plain, solitary and alone.

The chiefs answered in the affirmative.

"Do you see yan grove back thar?" and the white man pointed to a dense clump of pines about fifty rods to the right.

The chiefs answered with a nod of their plumed heads.

"Wal, now," continued the peacemaker, "let the bone of contention—that's the gal—be tied to that tree, then let the chiefs mount their hosses and light out, startin' from the edge of yan grove. Then the one that beats to the tree, and lays his hands on the gal's head fust, takes the ante—that's the gal."

"The head of White Coyote is deep with wisdom; Red Hawk is willing," said the Arapaho, promptly, for he felt satisfied that his pony was the fastest, and was anxious to be first in accepting the proposition; for then there would be no alternative, under the code of savage honor, but for the Kiowa to submit to the ordeal. This the latter did, in brief terms:

"Long Lance will run with the Arapaho."

This seemed to afford general satisfaction, since the compromise was likely to prove a source of no little pleasant excitement. Horseracing under any circumstances is a favorite amusement of all those South-western Indians; but the prize for which the two chiefs were now about to run made the occasion especially exciting.

The renegade made known to the captive the manner in which the dispute was to be settled. He then assisted her to rise, and placing her upon the back of a pony, started toward the lone tree upon the prairie, accompanied by two warriors.

While Octavia was being conducted to the winning goal, the whole party moved down close to the grove before mentioned, and the two young chiefs prepared themselves for the race. They stripped off every garment except their loin-cloths; removed their head-gearing and tied their long scalp-locks close down to their heads, so that not a hair would impede the speed of their animals.

They next stripped their animals of everything but the bridles, which consisted of a hair-bit and rein. The ponies were strong-limbed and fiery fellows; and each one, in the tribe to which he belonged, bore the reputation of being fast. This made each party confident of victory.

Octavia was taken to the tree and bound to its trunk in an upright position. A lariat was passed several times around her body, between her feet and neck, and the trunk of the tree, so that she could scarcely move a muscle. Thus secured, the renegade and two savages went back to the starting point, and poor Octavia found herself alone in a situation that well-nigh drove her mad. There were no hopes for escape, and as she pondered over her situation, a new fear took posses-

sion of her mind. Knowing how treacherous the savages were, she felt that it was no more than probable that the one beaten in the race would bury a tomahawk in her brain.

With eyes swimming in tears of agony, she watched the group of savages. She saw the chiefs mount their animals and turn, facing down toward her. She saw the savages part on either side of their men; she saw the renegade step out to one side and elevate the muzzle of a rifle in the air. She saw a little cloud of smoke puff out from the weapon—a sharp, splitting report crashed through the air—a savage yell followed, and the racers shot away over the plain!

At the same instant a terrible yell of surprise and the discharge of rifles told the two racers that something was not right behind; but they would not, they dared not, glance back to inquire the cause of the alarm. One movement—the turning of the head—might lose either one the race. But they were not long to remain ignorant of the cause of the wild confusion which they knew was not occasioned by their excitement over the race, for close behind them a voice, mingled with the clatter of other hoofs than their own animals', suddenly rung out, clear and distinct:

"*Over the track, smoky-skins, for hyar we come a-boomin'!*"

The next instant a horse and rider shot past them like an arrow!

The man had dashed from the grove behind the savages, the instant the signal for the start was given the chiefs, and all recognized in him a terrible foe. The chiefs uttered a cry of horror as he passed them, and with the desperation of madmen urged on their ponies. The race was not now between the two savages, but between the savages on the one side and an implacable foe on the other.

This foe was a person well advanced in years, with a small, lithe form, clothed in the buck-skin of a borderman. His bearded face was thin and wrinkled; and his sharp chin and long Roman nose lacked but a hair's-breadth, so to speak, of forming a natural bridge over a wide, bearded mouth.

The horse this man bestrode was as antiquated in looks as himself; but its speed was something wonderful to behold.

As the man shot by the astonished chiefs he turned his face, that was clothed in a broad, comical smile, and gave utterance to a defiant shout.

He reached the tree a hundred yards or so in advance of the savages, and drew up by Octavia's side.

"Stiddy, gal, stiddy!" he exclaimed, whipping out a long knife. "I've won the race, ar'n't I? You're mine, by the rampin' tigers! Up here, now; you're free!—quick, my good gal, and you're safe! There! away, old mare. Into it now—peg it down, Patience—*seat!*"

It had required but an instant for him to cut the captive's bonds, another to lift her to a seat before him, and then away he went, while the Indians, with a fearful war-whoop, thundered on past the tree, in pursuit.

"Good-by, smoky-skins," the reckless old borderman shouted back to his pursuers; "if you ketch us, you'll be the fust that ever laid it across ole Dakota Dan, the great Triangle, jist fresh down from the crisp Nor'-west!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW MASTER OF THE CAMP.

THE ranger's words were all lost to the ears of those they were intended for, but to Octavia's ears they were as tidings of joy supreme.

"Dakota Dan," she repeated, as though she might be mistaken in the words; "is it possible that I heard aright?"

"Yes, mum, I'm Dakota Dan, jist down, fresh as a new-plucked flower, from the Keya Paha; and proud I be of the name, and the man, too, Miss. Come, Patience, ole mare, sail into it—show the gal yer bottom! Smoke of Jerusalem! didn't I play it skinflintically to 'em smoky varlets? I war hid in that grove behind 'em, and when I sees what war up, I says: 'Dakota Dan, now, ole triangular, primp yerself and try yer nerve.' But they'll be more keerful next time. Whar d'ye live, gal—up to Conejos?"

"I belo g to an emigrant train," replied Octavia.

"Say ye do? How's it yer down yer?"

Briefly as possible, the maiden narrated her adventure from the time of leaving the train till her capture by the two chiefs.

"Judea!" exclaimed the old ranger, "then that's what made that thunderin' racket up that way. Thought it war

a hurricane or a volkaner—got a cannon, hain't ye? Licked the red-skins, didn't ye?"

Octavia scarcely knew which question to answer first, she was so delighted over her miraculous escape. However, she answered her interlocutor's queries as far as her own knowledge extended.

"Well," replied the reckless old ranger, times are a leetle frisky down this a-way now, and one's got to keep a-bobbin' to dodge all the dangers."

By this time the old borderman had placed nearly half a mile between him and the pursuing red-skins, who were now directly behind him, coming on a straight line. It was the desire of the ranger to get back to the grove from which he had burst so suddenly upon his foe; and, in order to accomplish this, he began bearing gradually toward the left. In a few minutes he was going directly north.

The enemy could have taken the "near cut" across and gained considerably on him; but, believing he was endeavoring to draw them into an ambush, they relinquished the chase altogether. This was contrary to anything the ranger had anticipated, as well as to the usual dogged patience and perseverance of savage vengeance.

This turn of affairs enabled the ranger to slacken the speed of his animal, when he dismounted and gave the mare up entirely to Octavia, he walking at her side with all the elastic spring and sprightliness of youth.

The maiden protested against this self-sacrifice in her behalf. It seemed to her that she was as well able to walk as the old man.

"Bless you, little 'un," the ranger responded, "you needn't worry one bit 'bout me. I'm growin' younger in spirit every day. My hair will git white, though, and ole Time will wear furrows into my face; but I reckon that's all owin' to the climate one's in, and the condition of his blood. 'Way up in the cool regions of Montana, one's vital fluid gits purty cloggy-like-thick, ye know. But come down this way into Dakota and Nu-braska, and it begins to thin up a leetle, and one steps friskier; but, come on down here into Nu Mexeko, and one's blood gits so thin that it runs right out at the pores of the skin. Nothin' but a good coat of dirt will keep a northern man's blood in him down here; then the sun bakes that on him, and he looks fur all the world like a Mexekin. That's what's ailin' me, Miss, but I hope you'll excuse my looks. But, here we are, little 'un—back to the very grove that I went bulgin' out of when the race commenced. Lor', but it does me a mortal sight of good to think how I waxed it to 'em smoky-skinned centipedes. But then, I've fooled red-skins a million times in my life—it's my forte, I sw'ar it is, to foolish red-skins. Foolishness of one sort or another allers did run natural-like in the Rackback family, and if one wasn't a fool, he had the knack of playin' it to a demonstration, and then—"

"Bow-wow!"

It was the sudden and deep bay of a dog, coming from the depths of the grove before them, that cut short the ranger's speech and forced a cry of surprise from Octavia's lips.

"Scorpions!" exclaimed the ranger, stopping short.

The next moment a dog came bounding through the shrubbery, and leaped upon the ranger, and frisked and capered around the horse in an excess of joy.

"There, now, gal," said Dakota Dan, with an air of whimsical satisfaction, "there you behold Dakota Dan, the great triangler red-skin extarminator. That"—thrusting out his finger at the dog with manifest delight—"that is Humility, my dorg. I left him here to watch my gun and accouterments while I sailed out and raked the ante at the boss-race," and the old man went off into a fit of hearty laughter at the thoughts of his own conceit.

"You see, Miss," he continued, "I'm simply ole Dan Rackback alone, but hitch in Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, and you have the 'triangle,' Dakota Dan. We're a kind of livin' clock-work—one part can't operate well without t'others: and when we git set a-goin'—buckle right down to the work, Lor'! then bounce, red-skins! away, buffaloes! howl, varmints, and you, ye peraroes, *dust!* You see, Miss, that dorg has a mortal sight of man gumpshin. That bow-wow was a challenge, which, translated to English, means, 'Who comes thar?' 'Scorpions,' war the counter-sign, or whatever ye call it, and then all war distinctly distinct. Yes, a noble pup, are Humility, my dorg, thar. He's a wonderful tooth for red-skins, and can foller the trail of a bird through the air. He's jist as good as ever scratched gravel from an Alpine peak, or dug snow for a

Saint Bernard monk. And so's Patience, my mare, here. She's a leetle thin jist at present, but can play tricks jist as good as any critter that ever tickled a' audience—good blood in her—jist as good as ever boxed Arabian soil or kicked the day-lights outen an Arab. Yes, noble critters are Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar. I could trace their pedegree cl'ar back to Noah and the ark."

"I know from experience," said Octavia, desirous of encouraging him in his love for his dumb companions, "that Patience is fast."

"Fast!" exclaimed the ranger, in apparent astonishment; "why, bless yer little soul, gal, ye don't know what fast is. You'd ort to see her do her best. As an illustrashin, I'll tell ye, while we rest, what we done oncet. Patience, she played blind, lame and halt, and I played crazy. In this condition we sailed into a crowd of Ingins to see what war goin' on; for we war ranger'n' for the Government then, and war actin' spy. Wal, we got in all right, but we looked so 'tarnal tough and discomboborated, that the red-skins concluded to have some fun and make us run the gantlet. So 'bout a million of them, more or less, formed in two lines facin', and started us down atwixt 'em, every sinner intending to whack us as we labored by. But Judea! I spoke to Patience and that's the last they see'd of her. Away she flew down that gantlet so swift that a crack, big as a tunnel, was act'ly split into the air, and then as the gap filled up again—rushed in from both sides, them red-skins war slapt together—that is the two lines—war jist sucked right in together so awfully that every red-skin war bu'sted. It's a fact; but now, Miss, we'll go."

The old borderman led the way from the grove and across the plain toward the north.

He moved briskly, and just as the last beams of light faded from the distant mountain heights they reached the train, which had gone into camp on the scene of the late conflict.

Amid the wildest excitement and shouts of joy, Octavia rode into camp.

"Bress de Lor' ob heaben!" shouted old Aunt Shady, clapping her fat hands with joy, and alternating between fits of laughter and outbursts of tears.

Octavia introduced her rescuer to the party. The name and deeds of Dakota Dan were well known to all, but it was the first occasion upon which any of them had ever met the distinguished scout and ranger.

Dan was for soon taking his departure, but on the earnest and urgent solicitation of the men and Octavia, he finally concluded to remain until morning. The emigrants also prevailed upon him, as a matter of honor as well as necessity, to take charge of the encampment, which he did with some reluctance, for he saw there was a great deal at stake. With his characteristic open-heartedness and familiar ways, the ranger set about his work of arranging the camp and horses in the safest condition possible under existing circumstances.

After all had been secured, and two guards for the first watch had been posted, the little band gathered in a group near the center of the camp, and entered into conversation.

Lanterns hung from the side of the wagons, lit up the scene. The late conflict was the principal topic discussed and commented upon.

"This 'ere is a most all-fired, ticklish kentry, friends," said Dan, philosophically. "If ye set down on the peraroe, ten to one you'll git rite up and look daggers at the cactus you sot on; and if ye lay down to rest, ten to one the lance of a red-skin 'll be jabbed into ye. If it ar'n't Ingins, why it's 'greasers,' and if it ar'n't greasers, it's outlaws, and if it ar'n't outlaws, it's the devil hisself. It's mighty risky, I tell ye, in you folks trampoozin' this 'ere kentry with feminine weemen, and afore ye git clean through to San Juan valley, I'm afraid you'll have skids of trouble. You see the great Triangle's been gailivantin' all over Nu Mexeko fur six months, and have gct the lay of the land purty prim. And we've had some fights too, that took every nerve of man, hoof and howler to fetch victory or death. Lor'! we've shed gallons and gallons of the best of blood since we've been down here."

"Bress my soul!" exclaimed old Aunt Shady at this juncture, innocent of any offense; "guess you won't shed much more—awful lean ole sinner."

"Always was, Aunt Shadder," replied Dan, good-naturedly; "it runs in the Rackback family. Thar war ten boys of us, and ole Mrs. Rackback used to stand us a whole summer in the garden fur bean-poles, to keep us outen mischief; but I growed faster'n the beans and pulled 'em all out by the roots,

and so I war took out of the garden and sent West to 'pre-empt.' But I'd rather be lean than plump and fat like you, Aunt Shadder. And I'll tell ye why. Buffaloes are so lean down here that the Ingins kill all the fat folks to fry their meat with."

Aunt Shady groaned with horror, but her emotions finally ended in a fit of laughter.

"Then you have no idea, Dan, who those rangers were, nor where they belong?" Major St. Kenelm asked.

"No more'n the man in the moon," responded the ranger. "They may b'long to some of the many military posts that stut these 'ere southern peraroes. What sort o' lookin' man war their leader, or did ye see?"

"We did not see him," St. Kenelm replied.

"I did," said Octavia; "he was a young man. After I left the train, he overtook me on the road, and we traveled and conversed together. He was gentlemanly and courteous, and dressed in a handsome uniform."

"You don't say!" said the ranger. "If they'd a-turned in and helped the Ingins butcher you folks, I'd 'a' swore then it war the outlaw gang of Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent. Did he tell you his name, Octavy?"

"He did not," replied the maiden, her face betraying some inward emotion which did not escape the eyes of old Aunt Shady.

"Chile ob my ole heart," she said, approaching the maiden and gazing down into her face with a lugubrious look, "what under de sun and shinin' stars ails you? Ar'n't you in love, chile, now say?"

Octavia blushed crimson and in a reproving tone replied:

"You must be crazy, Aunt Shady. Of course I love you and brother Albert."

"Now, honey, do be acritu, and don't forgit what de Bible says 'bout Andynius and Sappfry. Aunt Shady alers know dat you lub her and brudder Al, but you neber blush 'bout it dat way. No, chile, your ole aunty knows dar an sumthin' wrong wid dat heart ob your'n, and to-morrow I'll look into it. I'll sift it out, chile. I jist believe dat youn' feller you see'd on de road to Cornjose has gwine off wid your heart, and—"

"Oh, Aunt Shady, do be still," interrupted Octavia, a little provoked.

"Well, missus," said the old negress, relaxing into silence.

"If you do stop at Conejos," Dakota Dan said, "you want to keep yer eyes on yer mules, yer hands on yer pockets and yer breeches in yer boot tops, or, by Judea, them Mexicans will steal 'em. They're the dirtiest thieves that ever wore ha'r—cowardly, too, as any coyote that ever howled in the dark. They'd stab a dead man in the back and think they'd got revenge. But if you jist show 'em your spunk—the white of yer eye—let 'em b'lieve you'd rather fight thar eat, then they'll keep their places."

"Then the village is composed altogether of Mexicans, is it?" asked young Boswell.

"Mexican half-breeds, with a sprinklin' of American rouet abouts, Dutch, Irish, Scotch and so on."

"Do they all steal?"

"No; jist the 'greasers.'"

"I should think they could be broke of that," said Tom Gilbert.

"They can; lad. It's no use sayin' a Mexican can't be civilized and induced to quit bad tricks. When I war up to Denver City I see'd as thievin' a pack of 'em as ever robbed a hen-roost, eternally cured of stealin'. They war ketched in the act, tried and sentenced to be hung up by the heels over night. The judge said that stealin' war a disease with them—said it prevailed in the States to some extent; and was called 'kleptomony,' or 'keep-the-money,' or suthin' like that; and said the only thing that 'd cure it was an application of 'pervershinheelsoverhedum,' or some big Latin name I couldn't figure out, that sounds like that. At any rate ropes war provided and the diseased gentlemen marched down into 'Yoop-ee Gulch.' There the heels of the light-fingers were elevated heavenward, and securely fastened to the limbs of a majestic ole pine tree. Their heads jist teched the ground, and the way them invalids bellered for mercy and pawed the ground would make a buffler-bull blush to the tips of his horns. I tell ye what, ole Yoop-ee jist boomed, but, boys, it war a good idea. The judge war right. It cured them Mexicans of 'kliptoomany,' and made quiet men of them."

"Indeed?" said Major St. Kenelm, failing to read the twinkle in the old ranger's eyes. "I should have thought they would have been all the worse after such humiliating punishment."

"Lord, no, major! It never done any sich a thing, for in the night the coyotes and wolves went down into the gulch and eat their heads off close up to their heels."

A roar of laughter followed the old ranger's story, and it was some time before quiet was restored. When it was, however, the ranger rose to his feet, and turning to his dog, said:

"Come, Humility, we'd better go out and circle the camp, hadn't we?"

Humility licked his chops, rose to his feet, and crept softly away at the heels of his master.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PHANTOM AZTECS.

FIERCELY, desperately and deadly waged the conflict between the mysterious old man, Basil Walraymond, and his two companions on one side, and a horde of Ute savages on the other, there in the solitude of the San Juan valley, with the pall of night above and around them. The three white men seemed endowed with superhuman strength and shielded by an invisible hand. The Utes were all around them, surging to and fro, a living vortex. The air above their heads was a broad and continual glare of flashing tomahawks. Steel met steel in deadly clash and ring. Weapons flew through the air in every direction, knocked from the savages' hands by the sweeping gun-barrels of the miners.

The Indians could easily have shot them down, but it seemed as though they were willing to sacrifice a score of warriors that the whites might be taken alive. The dead and wounded were trampled under foot by their advancing comrades—a few moments more and by the sheer force of numbers they overwhelmed the three brave men, who, borne to the earth, were soon securely bound hand and foot. Then they were permitted to rise to their feet, and contrary to all they had ever heard of before of Indian customs, they were blindfolded. But no sooner was this done than they heard a voice speaking English and directing the movements of the savages through an interpreter, in the crowd that still surged and howled around them. This convinced the captives that a white man had led the war-party into the valley.

Several minutes were taken up in the construction of litters upon which to convey the dead and wounded back to the village: but this done, and all secure, the procession started on its journey through the lonely halls of the grim old forest.

The captives walked with great difficulty, for the bonds upon their ankles would not admit of a full step. And like animals, they were led by means of a rope placed around each one's neck.

Only the soft tread of the many feet, the rustle of a bush, and the faint murmur of the foliage overhead, broke the solemn silence of the night.

Many and bitter were the thoughts of the captives as they trudged on through the woods—whither they knew not. Thus in one brief hour had all their hopes of the future, whatever they were, been shattered by the hand of fate. All their dreams of wealth had vanished, and they had awakened to the horrible fact that they were no longer masters, but doomed prisoners.

For weary miles they journeyed on through the woods. To the captives each mile seemed a league. Pain caused by walking lengthens distance fourfold, and crowds minutes into moments if a certain length of time is to end that suffering. As they traveled on, they became aware of one thing: that most of their captors had taken another route, or else had fallen behind, and that most, if not all, of those remaining were white men. If so, they were satisfied the men were outlaws. As if to settle the question, a halt was suddenly ordered, when a man came up to the captives, and, in a low, muffled voice, intended to be solemn, he said:

"Strangers, you are the captives of the Phantom Aztecs, upon whose sacred soil your infidel feet have intruded. You stand at the gate that opens to admit us to the temple in which the judgment hall is open for your reception."

A ponderous door creaked on its rusty hinges. The captives were conducted into an inclosure where they could almost feel the dismal gloom of the place. They walked upon a floor of solid stone that was carpeted with the dust and mold of ages; and it at once occurred to the mind of Basil Walraymond that they were inside of one of those dismal old buildings in Quivira ruins.

They followed the passage some distance—at times over an uneven and slippery floor—and finally turned an angle into another passage or hall, which they traversed until a door disputed further advance. This, however, was at once opened, and the captives were ushered into an apartment which they knew must be more capacious by the purity of the surrounding atmosphere.

The three men were now seated upon a low wooden bench, side by side, when one of the captors addressed them thus:

"You are now at the bar of the judgment hall of the Phantom Aztecs. The most high judge sits before you who will preside over your trial and judge you accordingly. Behold!"

The blindfolds were all suddenly removed from the captives' eyes. The glare of lights dazed them for a moment, but soon becoming accustomed to the change, they looked upon a scene well calculated to fill them with silent terror.

The room in which they sat was a large one, and its crumbling walls and ceiling verified the former suspicion of Basil Walraymond—they were within one of those ancient ruins still to be found in the valley of the San Juan. There were evidences in abundance, however, of its having undergone general repairs to make the place inhabitable; and in the lurid glare of the torches that lit up the room, it presented a weird, solemn aspect. Around the room were seated a dozen persons, all wearing long, dirty white robes and masks of snow-white whiskers reaching to their waists. A covering resembling a hood was upon each head. At one end of the room and upon a kind of dais sat the chief priest of the Phantom Aztecs, looking down upon the captives with an assumed benignity. He wore no mask, for his long gray beard corresponded well with those of his masked comrades, and gave him a ghostly appearance in the dim light. A curiously-wrought crown was upon his head. Before him was a stone altar, and upon this burned a lamp that gave forth a sickly blue light. In this light, however, the three captives studied closely the face of the "most high." It was a face wearing the stamp of fifty or more busy years. The features were strong in their characteristic outlines, but hard, cold and cruel. The eyes were of a fiery black, and shot their burning glances from beneath heavy, sullen brows.

There was little in the man's looks calculated to inspire hope in the breasts of the captives. They knew, of course, that the "Phantom Aztecs" farce was a glaring imposition, around which had been thrown a mantle of false solemnity and an air of mystery. They felt satisfied that if those venerable masks and priestly robes were thrown aside, a band of fierce and desperate outlaws would stand revealed.

Our friends were also satisfied that they were not the first men that had been led captives into that room, for the "phantoms" went about their business in a way that showed experience.

As soon as the prisoners had been seated, and time given them to impress their minds with the mysteries of their surroundings, the "most high priest" arose with solemn dignity, and read, in a low, measured tone, or pretended to read, from a roll of ancient-looking parchment, these words:

"The 'Phantom Aztecs' are the chosen people of God. Away amid the fertile valleys, surrounded by snow-capped mountains, of a new world, have they planted their seed and their faith, and written upon tables of stone the history of their deeds. But now, in the midst of their prosperity, what comes? The Spanish Jesuit, with a dagger in one hand and peace offering in the other. The people of the chosen few received them, and at the same time a blow in the heart. Ruin followed. The temples of the sun have been destroyed and the watch-fires of the Montezumas gone out. But their spirits are still here—here to-night, where three hundred years ago they walked in flesh. They shall still rule over the land and sit in judgment upon the intruder till our land once more teems with wealth and prosperity. So saith the spirit that is the guide to the hand that writes this communication, in the spirit-land."

He laid the "ancient" document of the inspired spirit aside and said:

"Three men have been taken captives on the sacred soil of the Aztecs. Each and all of them will be given a chance to speak—to plead for his life. If you do not desire to speak, it becomes the duty of the 'Judge of the Phantom Aztecs' to pass judgment upon you."

The "judge" sat down when the mysterious old man, Basil Walraymond, rose to his feet and said, in a calm, unmoved tone:

"Sir, I scorn your mummary—this mock and cowardly tribunal I despise. You are a set of villains—thirteen of you too cowardly to face three helpless men whom you en-

gaged a hundred savages to capture. You and your allies have shot down innocent men who never thought of harming you, then you hide your faces beneath masks and your forms beneath gowns of white. But mind you, sirs!" and the old man glanced menacingly and fiercely at the different forms around the room, "the eye of the inscrutable Good seeth every face here, and searcheth every heart!"

The form of the noble old man seemed to grow taller in its majestic grandeur, while his face was surrounded with a halo of that exalted humanity which fills the heart with profound admiration, and which seemed to radiate the sublimity of a soul bearing the image of its Maker.

When Basil Walraymond sat down, the judge again arose, and in a tone that trembled with manifest fear or anger, said:

"That captive has insulted the tribunal of Phantom Aztecs, and I pronounce upon him the sentence of *death in the tiger-pit at midnight!* Have the other captives any thing to say?"

"I wish to say—" said young Sheridan, springing to his feet, but here his lips became sealed, as if his courage had failed him in further utterance. This was not the cause, however, of brave Asa Sheridan's sudden silence. Behind the judge was a small, square opening in the wall, intended, no doubt, as a window, and in this opening he saw an object suddenly appear that seemed to seal his lips with the silence of death, and petrify his form to a stony rigidity.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT SHERIDAN SAW.

A WHITE face, set in a frame of golden hair, and clear-cut as an ancient cameo. Dark-blue eyes with long, drooping lashes. Ripe red lips, to which was pressed a snowy, tapering finger—in fact, the face of a lovely young girl was the object that had appeared at the opening behind the judge's stand and sealed the lips of Asa Sheridan. Her finger was pressed upon her lips, and this, and the imploring look on her beautiful face, was plainly significant as an order for silence on his part. He obeyed the silent appeal with an involuntary impulse; and the face instantly disappeared.

"Why does this captive hesitate?" demanded the judge of the Phantom Aztecs.

"Because I consider this court beneath my notice," responded Sheridan, seating himself. But he regretted his hasty words, the moment they were spoken. There was something that now threw an air of the deepest gravity and earnestness around the judgment hall to Sheridan. It was not the white robed figures, nor the emblems of mortality that decorated the walls in repulsive ghastliness, nor the ghostly light around them that had thus impressed him. It was that angelic face that he had seen at the window, and the order which the silent lips had given. But it was too late to recall his words now. The judge rose and said:

"I sentence that man to the Dungeon of Darkness. What has the other prisoner to say?"

"Nothing," replied Nathan Wolfe, "more than that I would give a great deal to fathom the secret of that Centaur we saw to-night in the valley."

"That man," said the "most high," "will be held in bonds for further trial."

And thus ended the court of the Phantom Aztecs. The lights were extinguished, and each of the captives led away in a different direction through the ruins.

The blindfold was replaced over Walraymond's eyes, and while it was being tied, the voice of the judge said to his companions in Spanish

"*Yo conozco que anciano.*"

But Basil Walraymond knew enough of the language to understand what the judge said; viz.: "*I know that old man.*"

It sent a shiver to the old man's heart. It recalled a bitter thought of the past. But he said nothing, nor showed signs of the terrible emotions surging in his breast.

He was conducted along a narrow, damp passage to a door which at once wheezed upon its rusty hinges, and admitted the prisoner and his conductor into the open air; yet this air seemed filled with the resinous vapor of burning pine; and he could hear the crackle of fire, and the fluttering of the flames.

"You are now in the tiger-pit," said his conductor; "stand on your guard, señor."

Then the bandage was removed, and the glare of a dozen torches blinded the old man for full a minute; but when his eyes had become accustomed to the light, he glanced around him. He saw that he was in an open courtyard, around which rose the massive walls of one of those ancient ruins which had doubtless been used by its founders as a temple or monastery. The main entrance—an arched doorway—was blocked up with stone. On three sides, the buildings had crumbled to ruins, leaving only about ten feet of the basement walls standing. On the fourth side rose the old building from which he had just come, and which looked as though it might tumble down at any moment. These seamed, scarred and time-worn walls, however, bore evidence of skillful architecture.

Tall, rank weeds grew on the top of the ruins, and parasites clambered over and down the wall like a curtain of green, as if nature had designed that the deformities of the ruins should be concealed from view.

Blazing torches were fastened in niches and crevices in the wall, and these threw a wavering yellow light over the place.

The ground beneath the prisoner's feet was covered with white sand, and bore evidence of a late struggle—a bloody combat. And it must have been desperate, for here and there amid the footprints that were twisted deep into the sand, were dark spots where the thirsty earth had drunk up the life-blood of the contestants.

From the top of the ruins a dozen "Phantom Aztecs," in their venerable masks and white robes, looked down upon the old man, who stood there with folded arms, his tall, martial figure appearing Titanic in the uncertain glow of the dim torches.

Basil Walraymond knew not what was to come, but the footprints and dark stains on the ground carried his thoughts back to the gladiatorial days of ancient Rome. This gave him hope. He felt that he was the equal of any man in physical power and in the use of the sword. Fifty years had blunted none of his fine sensibilities nor reduced his wonderful energy and strength.

While he stood waiting for the appearance of his antagonist in the "tiger-pit," as the place had been denominated, something bright flashed suddenly across his vision, and was immediately followed by the metallic clink of something against the wall behind him. He turned around without manifesting the least curiosity and glanced downward. A small knife—a kind of poignard—lay at the base of the wall. What was this for? Was he indeed to be made a prey to wild beasts, with a poignard only for a weapon?

As if in answer to the question, a small door in the basement of the wall on the east side of the court was suddenly opened, and a huge gray panther, already goaded to frenzy—with dripping mouth and bloodshot eyes, sprung out into the inclosure with Basil Walraymond!

CHAPTER XI.

THE ARENA OF DEATH.

A MURMUR of excitement escaped the lips of those shrouded figures on the top of the walls, and they pressed nearer the edge of the arena.

The door through which the panther had been driven from its cage into the inclosure, was immediately closed behind the beast.

The panther landed in the arena in a crouching position. His mouth was covered with bloody foam which told that he had been maddened before he was turned out. His eyeballs burned with that deadly, greenish hue so peculiar to this species of animals. The creature's head turned from side to side as though it were studying its new situation. The light blinded it at first, but it soon became accustomed to this. Then it espied the tall, majestic form of Basil Walraymond.

A quiver seemed to thrill through the beast's whole form; its nose fell between its paws and its tail began the slow, serpent-like movement which warned the old man that the worst was soon to come.

Basil Walraymond knew now what was meant by the "tiger-pit," and when he remembered that his captors had spoken in Spanish, he was satisfied they were Spanish outlaws from the South, whose hereditary and barbarous love for the sport of bull-fighting was being gratified by turning wild beasts loose with captives in the court of the ruined monastery—

a cruel sport at which a red savage's heart would have revolted.

The eyes of Walraymond and the panther met. The old man knew wherein lay his only power over the beast, and from the moment of its first appearance, he watched his opportunity to catch the creature's glance. And when their eyes met, the ferocious creature seemed awed by the subtle influence of the old man's unflinching gaze. Had the man and beast been alone, the conflict would have ended there in that battle of eyes; but the shrouded spectators witnessing what seemed to be the panther's fear, threw a stone and hit it. This broke the spell that held it motionless. With a low, purring sound and violent lashing of the tail, it gathered its strength and shot through the air toward the old man.

With the agility of the panther itself, Walraymond sprung aside, and as the animal passed him, he dealt it a terrible blow upon the jaw that sent it rolling across the arena with a maddened scream.

A burst of applause from the lips of the spectators above echoed through the night.

The panther was soon upon its feet, and smarting under the blow it had received, and a shower of pebbles hurled on it from above, its ferocious anger was fully aroused, and it at once leaped forward toward its antagonist again. Walraymond endeavored to elude it, as before, but he sprung the wrong way and the full weight of the beast came violently against him, and together they rolled to the earth in a deadly struggle.

That natural instinct which causes one to throw up an arm or hand to protect the face from danger that cannot otherwise be averted, gave Basil Walraymond some little advantage over his brute foe. The animal aimed to fasten its fangs in his face, but his left arm intervening, passed into the open jaws midway between the wrist and elbow. The limb itself was protected by three thicknesses of clothing, the outer one being of heavy buckskin. I said the limb was protected, but it was very little, for the sharp fangs of the beast cut through all thickness of clothing into the quivering flesh.

No word or groan escaped the lips of the old man, as, in rapid evolutions, he and his foe rolled to and fro across the space locked in a deadly embrace. With his right hand he attempted to beat the beast off, or break its terrible jaws, but each blow only seemed to madden the creature all the more.

Shouts of fiendish joy rung from above. Peals of demoniac laughter burst forth over the old man's fruitless efforts to vanquish his foe.

Silently, desperately Basil Walraymond fought the panther. His fist rose and fell with awful violence upon the hairy demon—the demon tugged and tore at his arm. And all this time but one thought occupied the old man's mind. That knife: if he could only get a hold of that knife which some unseen hand had thrown into the "tiger-pit," he might win the battle. Toward the side where the weapon had fallen he exerted every nerve to turn the tide of conflict. Fierce and determined were his efforts directed by that same calm, deliberate mind. Around and around, and over and across the arena they whirled and struggled, until at length the desired spot was reached. Then he groped for the knife; he found it. Firmly he grasped it—fiercely he drove the blade into the panther's side.

The beast uttered a growl—almost a groan—and then tore and tugged more fiercely at the helpless arm.

Again and again was the blade driven into the animal's side. The warm blood spurted out upon the old man's hands, upon his breast until he was saturated with gore.

The ground, too, became almost slippery with the crimson tide; still the conflict continued, but the panther's strength was fast failing. His eyes became glazed, and at length it released its hold on the man's arm and uttered a scream that was piteous to hear. Then it tottered, reeled, and fell over dead.

Basil Walraymond had conquered. He rose to his feet. He was covered with gore. His left arm dangled limp and helpless by his side. It had been crushed and broken between the jaws of the beast. Blood was trickling down the torn and lacerated limb and dripping from the finger-tips. A strange look was on the old man's face. His white beard was dabbled with blood. A smile half childlike in its innocence lit up his features. No word escaped his lips. He lifted his eyes toward his enemies as if to receive their applause. They met those of the judge of the "Phantom Aztecs" glaring down upon him. No sea of spectators foam

flecked with waving handkerchiefs met his eyes. No thunder of applause congratulated him on his victory. Only the voice of the "judge" greeted his ears.

"By the gods, man, you shall not escape," the demon said; then turning to a companion he continued: "Turn to the bear—the fun is not ended."

Instantly, almost, another door in the wall was opened, and a huge black bear came lumbering out into the arena with a fierce growl. It scented the blood of the dead panther. It advanced across the court and attacked the still quivering carcass with violent ferocity. It had not seen its living antagonist yet.

Basil Walraymond flinched not, although he must have known that he was no match for the bear. He glanced around him for some avenue of escape. He measured with his eyes the height of the surrounding walls. They were too high for his broken arm. His eyes fell upon the blocked gateway where had once been the main entrance to the courtyard. To this he advanced. Then he lifted his face toward heaven and murmured a prayer. The face of Sampson could not have been more wondrous in its deep sublimity when he asked God for power to destroy the temple of his tormentors.

The fiends on the wall groaned in mockery of the old man's prayer. But he heeded them not. He placed his shoulder against the barricade and pushed against it.

A derisive laugh burst from the lips of the spectators.

But their laugh turned to a cry of surprise. The wall yielded to the tremendous power brought against it. It started outward and fell with a thunderous crash.

Then through the arched opening sprang the old man, with a shout of triumph.

"Ay, by the heavens above, I'll be even with you yet, Leopold Hamallado," he hurled back in thunderous tones as he disappeared from the arena, for he, too, had recognized a face—the face of the "Phantom Aztec" judge.

Fierce yells rose upon the air, as a score of white-robed figures hurried in pursuit of the old man.

But Basil Walraymond was free—beyond their power—Basil Walraymond was safe, and with all the pain and agony of a crushed and broken arm to bear, he hurried on through the lonely halls of the night.

CHAPTER XII.

ASA SHERIDAN'S PRISON.

Two men conducted Asa Sheridan to the dungeon of darkness. One led the way with a torch, and the other brought up the rear with a cocked pistol at the young man's head.

He was not blindfolded again. He was led along a dismal passage to the head of a stone stairway leading down into the dungeon. The man with the torch went ahead, and Asa followed him, the second robber remaining at the head of the stairs, on guard.

The guide led the way across the moldy stone floor to a heavy door, which stood ajar, and which opened into the dungeon. Into this Asa was led, then left alone in darkness, the outlaw locking the door as he went out.

The captive caught a glimpse of the room while the light of the torch was within it. It was a low, narrow apartment, having more the appearance of a vault or crypt than of a jail. There was no regular place of ventilation, and the only air that entered the chamber came in through the crevices in the walls. Even this seemed foul and unwholesome.

It was with a terrible feeling that young Sheridan now fully realized his situation—that he stood alone in the dungeon of that ancient ruin, where captive feet had doubtless stood two centuries before. His thoughts were any thing but pleasant, for he was satisfied that the ruins were the retreat of a band of outlaws in whose hearts there was no mercy. But he did not grow despondent. One bright spot in his memory shone with the resplendent beauty of a star. It was the face that he had seen at the window when he sat in the "judgment hall"—that fair, lovely face, and those soulful eyes from whose blue depths shone the light of innocence and purity.

By continued and persistent efforts, Sheridan succeeded in working the bonds off his hands and arms. This encouraged him to seek for further liberty. He took a Lucifer match from his pocket and lit it, with which to explore his prison-cell. The light lasted but for a few brief moments, but long enough to convince him that there was no

mortal chance of escape without aid, so he sat down and gave way to his emotions. He pondered over his situation, and wondered what the fate of his companions would be. The noble face of that wonderful old man, Basil Walraymond, rose before his mental vision in all its mysterious beauty. Some intangible power had bound his affections to that man. There was something in the great, generous soul that attracted objects around it, as though possessed of a spiritual polarity.

Thus pondering Sheridan leaned his aching head against the wall and tried to forget his troubles, his dangers and painful anxieties, and courted the sweet oblivion of sleep.

He had fallen into a doze, when he heard a key inserted into the rusty lock and turned. The next moment the door swung open, and a man in a brigandish-looking suit—a rough, bearded face, and a girdle bristling with weapons, entered. He carried a dim, sputtering lamp, which he placed on the floor, then seated himself, with his back against the door, loosened a revolver, and assuming an attitude of ease, said:

"Youngster, I reckon as what you think us a 'tarnal tuff set of fellers here; but if ye do, it's because you don't know any thing 'bout us."

"I am satisfied in regard to your character," replied Asa, keeping his hands behind him, that the outlaw might not discover their freedom.

"Admittin' it all, wouldn't you like a chance for life?"

"I'm not a bit particular," responded the prisoner, determined to show no over-anxiety to jump at any compromise.

"But wouldn't you walk out of here if a few words, truthfully spoken, would open that door and strip off your bonds?"

"I would prefer the fresh air of heaven to this pest-hole, as any fool ought to know," Asa replied, anxious to know what the outlaw had to propose without committing himself.

"Young man, the captain sent me here to talk, not to quarrel. If you will make a clean breast of the object that brought you and your companions—especially that tall old nan—into this valley, you'll be permitted to leave here alive."

"I haven't the least assurance that you will do as you say. However, we came into this country to prospect for gold. We came from Santa Fe. I never questioned my companions as to their past life, nor they me. It was none of my business what the past had been to them."

"I'm not willing to accept this story," said the outlaw.

"You can go to the deuce then," blurted Sheridan, contemptuously.

"You can save the life of that old man by revealing what it is believed you know of him," said the outlaw.

"I have told all I know. Even if I did know more, I'd be a fool to compromise myself with you. No, sir, I am not the coward to betray my comrades, even if there were anything to betray them in."

"Well," said the outlaw, rising to his feet, and taking up the lamp, "it's no use talkin' to you; the old man will have to die."

He turned and went out, closing and locking the door behind him.

Asa sunk back against the wall, his breast convulsed with the emotions of a new and terrible fear. He closed his eyes as if to shut out some horrible vision.

A slight noise arrested his attention. He bent his ear and listened. He could hear a faint sound like that which would be produced by something crawling upon the moldy floor. Of this there was no doubt; and a feeling akin to horror crept like an icy chill over him, when he discovered that the sound originated within his dungeon.

What was it?—a serpent—some venomous reptile that had entered through a fissure in the wall? Was it some tool of the outlaws sent in by some secret way to assassinate him in the dark?

Asa asked himself these questions, then held his breath in horrible suspense and listened.

He can hear the thing coming closer and closer, like a serpent dragging along its slimy folds. He can now see two dim, glowing orbs of fire appear through the darkness before him. He sees them draw nearer and nearer. And now he feels a warm air strike upon his cold cheek, but it sends a chill through his whole form. It is the breath of some living creature—a hot breath. The next instant something clammy touches his face.

It was a human hand!

CHAPTER XIII.

ZELLA'S MISSIVE.

ASA SHERIDAN could bear the suspense no longer, and he spoke out:

"Who are you?—do you intend to murder me?"

"Sh! Golly, no, I don't," was the response, spoken in a low tone and the unmistakable accent of an African.

"Then what do you want here?"

"Want you, I guess," was the laconic reply.

"Who are you?"

"I's Slyly, I is."

"I should think so; but Slyly who?"

"Humph! jings, I don't know. Guess I's a little chunk cut out ob some dark night, for I's as black as dis room."

"I understand," said Sheridan; "you are a nigger; but how did you get in here?"

"Popped in when de robber went out. Oh, I can creep everywhere jist like a weasel, and I know ebbery nook and corner ob dis ole wolf-den, I do, and—"

Scratch went something across the wall, and the blue flame of a match told what it was. In a moment the light flared out, then the darkey touched the flame to the end of a tallow dip, in whose light Sheridan scanned his visitor.

He was a block out of the night, sure enough—black as ebony. He was bareheaded and barefooted, and wore a suit which consisted of shirt and pants, that fitted his form almost as close as the sable hide. He was small, lithe and active as a cat. He could not have been over fifteen or sixteen years of age. His woolly hair was cut close to his head, and as he turned his great white eyes and double row of white, pearly teeth toward the prisoner, the latter could scarcely repress a smile at the serio-comical expression upon the dusky face of the boy, who peered up at him with a broad grin.

"Who told you to come here, Slyly?" Asa asked.

"Dat 'll tell you," the lad replied, handing him a slip of paper neatly folded.

Sheridan unfolded the missive, upon which was written, in a fine, delicate hand, these words:

"Stranger, you can trust the bearer of this note. He will guide you to a point of safety. Obey his injunctions in every particular, and all will end well. I tried to prevent you from bringing judgment on yourself to-night, when I signaled to you from the window of the 'judgment hall.' But you must not have seen me, or else you did not understand my signal. However, all may come out well yet. ZELLA."

"Who is Zella?" asked Sheridan, when he had finished the friendly missive.

"Why, golly, she's Zella, dat's who," replied the lad, emphatically.

"Well, Zella—Zella who?" repeated Asa.

"Golly, but you know how to ax questings. Why, she's my missus, and de captin's daughter. She sent me here to git you outen dis place. Guess she's in lub wid somebody not a thousand miles from here," and the darkey rolled up his big white eyes in a knowing manner, at the same time giving the corner of his mouth a significant twitch.

"Well, who is the captain of whom you speak?"

"Ki-yil but you's one ob dem to ax and ax questions. But I won't answer dat one. De young missus said to not tell you anyting 'bout de folks round dese diggings. Oh, I tell ye, massa!" and the boy shook his head mysteriously, "dar's some awful t'ings gwine on round here! But de missus told me not to hint a word to you, so I guess I won't."

"Is your mistress a young unmarried woman?"

"Yes; and you jis' bet if she ain't de spankanistest purty girl in de whole world. Lor' bless me, massa, she's sweet as honey."

"She has blue eyes and dark-brown hair, hasn't she?"

"In course she haba. Whar you see dat girl now? Jis' tell me dat, will you?"

"No difference, Slyly, where I have seen her."

"Golly, but you's a queer chap; but de young missus told me to git you outen dis place, and I'm gwine to do it. I know ebbery t'ing 'bout dis ole place, and am to prove it to you. See dat, sah?"

The darkey advanced to the wall and pulled a large stone out of the side of the dungeon. It had fitted the hole so exactly that no one would have thought of its being loose. The opening was plenty large to admit the body of a man through it; and so the youth lost no time in leading the way from the dungeon, closely followed by young Sheridan.

They soon found themselves where it was necessary to

extinguish the light. They then groped their way onward through the gloomy passages of the ghostly old ruins.

They soon came to a flight of stone steps that were covered with mold and slime. Up these they crept softly, and then passed out into the open air.

In the shadows of the ruins they paused, for here and there through the gloom they could see lights bobbing about in great haste, and hear voices calling to each other from the depths of the surrounding forest.

"What mean those lights and voices out yonder, Slyly?" Sheridan asked.

"Dey're s'arching fur de ole man wid de white beard. He got away, he did, massa."

"Thank God!" muttered the young man; "lead the way, Slyly; I am ready."

"Well now, you jis' keep still, young feller, till dis chile git ebbery t'ing reddy. I's gwine to leab you here and git a torch. No one'll t'ink den but what it's de light ob' one ob de robbers. You jis' look off dat way like all git out, and when ebber you see a light stop still, den sink down, den pop up, den sink down, den up ag'in; den you jis' light out like de debbil war arter you. Run straight to'r'd de light, and when you git dar I'll be dar, too, den away we'll go to de mountain cave, or de grotto, as de young missus call it."

Having thus instructed him, the little darkey glided away, and scarcely five minutes had elapsed ere Asa saw the preconcerted signal on the bluff to the north of the ruins.

Without a moment's hesitation, he started on a run toward the light. Half a dozen rifles rung suddenly out behind him, and several bullets whistled in close proximity to his ears. He stumbled and almost fell, but gathering himself up he ran swiftly on.

He soon came up to Slyly, who, taking the lead, conducted him away through the woods, along tortuous winding paths, up the mountain side, through black-mouthed canyons, over dangerous ledges and yawning chasms, until they finally came to a halt in a little cave or grotto far up amid the clouds.

"Here we am, massa," said Slyly, with an air of relief, "and here you must stay till de young missus t'ink it am safe fur you to leab."

He took a match from his pocket and lit the candle he had used in the dungeon.

"You see, massa," he continued, pointing around the cave, "dar am a bed, dar's sumthin' to eat, and dar's sumthin' to drink."

"Who prepared this retreat for me, Slyly?"

"De young missus told me to bring dem t'ings here, and I done it."

"Tell her Heaven will bless her for this kindness; for I may never see her, even to thank her for what she has done."

"Why, massa?— Oh, de good Lor', massa! you's as white as a ghost! You ar'n't dead, am you, massa?"

"No, Slyly; but I am wounded and bleeding to death. The devils shot me when I ran out from under shelter of the ruins. Tell Zella that—"

He did not finish the sentence, but turning white as a corpse fell in a dead faint to the earth.

The blood was streaming in a little rivulet from a wound in his side!

CHAPTER XIV.

A VISIT TO THE CONEJOS SALOON.

WE now go back to the friends we left encamped on the plain near Conejos. The night wore away without any further demonstrations on the part of the Indians.

The mysterious rangers who had saved the train did not come back.

By daylight the train was in motion, and a few hours' drive brought them to the village. Dakota Dan, who was still with them, had preceded them to the town, and had selected a good camping-ground, where water and pasture were convenient for the animals.

The camp and its occupants at once became the center of attraction to the citizens of the dull little village. They visited the emigrants daily, and the young folks, of whom there were several dark-eyed maidens and dashing youths, soon became acquainted with the young people from the East.

Conejos was a secluded little place, nestled at the foot of the mountain, and almost out of reach of communication with other parts of the world, except what it had by a weekly mail running from there south.

A wealthy Spaniard had first settled there, around whose imposing *casa* he had erected a number of adobe buildings for his army of peons; but the man dying, the ranche went to wreck and ruin, and strangers finally came in and repaired it, and added other buildings, until it now numbered some thirty dwellings and two hundred souls.

The present population was chiefly Spanish-Mexicans, with a goodly number of Americans and a sprinkling of foreigners. Some of these, especially the Americans, were engaged in the cattle-trade, some in mining, some in hunting, while a large per cent. followed no avocation at all, unless it was to drink, fight and gamble—a curse entailed upon nearly every South-western town and village.

Situated, as Conejos was, away from the seat of legal restraint, it naturally became a little worse in the way of lawless characters than most places of its size. If the town did not afford sufficient business for the outlaws and gamblers, they would visit other settlements for victims, but hide themselves at Conejos.

I will here say that our emigrant friends were entirely out of the course they had intended to pursue in getting into the San Juan valley. The mistake had been made through the want of a guide, and a knowledge of the topography of the country. This, then, accounted for their being at Conejos.

Dakota Dan warned them as to the character of the town; although the ranger himself was a stranger there, he yet knew of its bad reputation.

The better class of the population were in constant fear and dread of the mountain banditti; albeit a good many around the village were termed outlaws. But then there are grades of robbers and outlaws the same as there are grades of society. One was that class to which belonged those daring, fearless fellows, whose homes were in the mountain fastnesses; the other, those cowardly desperadoes that murder before they steal.

Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent, and his band had been keeping up a general excitement for a hundred miles around, and the Conejosites were in hourly expectation of a visit from this young outlaw.

On the evening of the second day of our friends' sojourn, Dakota Dan approached Major St. Kenelm and asked:

"Look 'e here, major, wouldn't you like to see life in Conejos by 'gaslight'?"

"Well, really, Dan, the thought had not occurred to my mind before; but if you think we won't get into trouble with those desperadoes, I wouldn't mind going with you."

"All we've got to do, major, is to keep mum. But then you'd better fill yer pockets with revolvers, for fear some one might stumble against you. To have the grit to shoot a man down here in Mexico for a triflin' thing carries greater weight than shootin' in defense of one's life. The latter is a necessity; the former a spirit of bravado that shows a recklessness of what follers—that you shoot fur the fun of it."

Like all such places, Conejos had a saloon, which sported the euphonious name of the "Swill-Pail." To this was attached all the conveniences required by men who wished to spend their time and money at cards, dice, or any other game they preferred. Toward this saloon and gambling den Dakota Dan led the way.

The old ranger was known in Conejos only by hearsay; and he had made it a point to keep his identity from them; for, if known to the hunters and rangers that made the "Swill-Pail" a favorite resort, it would be expected of him that he mingle with them in their sprees.

Reaching the saloon, the two opened the door and strode boldly in. The clink of glasses, high words, ribald oaths, shuffling cards, rattling dice, the fumes of tobacco-smoke and liquor greeted their senses as they entered.

The house was full of men of different nationalities—all rough, bearded looking fellows.

A low-browed German and his wife waited behind the bar.

St. Kenelm stepped up and called for drinks for himself and friend—also cigars. Paying for them, they retired to seat near an open window, where they could overlook the scene. The idle throng of loungers eyed them closely.

The room was about sixty feet long, and half of its length was taken up by deal tables, around most of which were seated men at cards—gambling. Here and there were groups of two, four, and on up to a dozen men, standing and lounging about in boisterous conversation. All seemed desirous

of talking at once, save those fellows at the table. A deep silence reigned; not a word was heard as they shuffled and dealt their cards, and glanced nervously around and at the coveted "stakes." The depleted exchequers of those standing near made them the inactive spectators to those engaged, while they waited and watched their chances to be invited to step up and "lubricate."

The most central object of the saloon, however, was a big, burly desperado known as Missouri Moll, and who drove the stage running from Conejos south, to and fro, once a week. Up and down the full length of the hall this man strode, bantering certain ones out to fight and trying to provoke others into a quarrel.

"Woof!" he suddenly exclaimed, shaking himself like a huge bear, "I'm jist sp'ilin' for a fight, and I'll face anybody or everybody here, I don't keer a cuss which. Come, trot out some of yer big crowin' cocks, if they want to bounce spurs with this ole chicken, Missouri Moll, the King of the Stage."

No one responded to his urgent request, but hearing a man talking rather loud at the other end of the saloon, he waltzed up to him and said:

"See here, Manuel Chicaloo, do you know what you are sayin'? Are you throwin' out insinuations against Missouri Moll?"

"I wasn't sayin' anything 'bout you, Missouri; I wasn't even thinkin' of you."

"Ho-ho, therel the devil you say!" roared the bully; "then I'm beneath your notice, am I? See here, Chicaloo, you've got to fight me for that insult. You sha'n't run over—"

"You misunderstood me, Missouri, you did indeed. I said—"

"Oh! then I'm a fool, am I? Well, by thunder, I won't take that," and the much-injured Missouri Moll "squared" off and knocked Manuel Chicaloo down.

At this same instant a shout, a pistol-shot and a groan came from the opposite end of the hall, and drew the attention of our friends in that direction.

A brief scuffle ensued, during which a number of lamps and tables were overturned upon the floor, which was of the solid ground.

"Tharl!" roared Missouri Moll, as if half provoked, "I'm wanted up thar. It beats the ole devil that I've got to be everywhere to keep peace among this quar'lin' pack."

The desperado moved toward the opposite end of the hall, and the crowd swayed after him.

For a while a Babel-like murmur filled the room, then the hoarse voice of the stage-driver was heard to shout:

"Ol'ar the way thar, ye varmints!"

The crowd at once parted, and four men, carrying the lifeless body of a man, moved down the hall and out at the door. And a thread of blood stretched the full length of the building out into the darkness.

Major St. Kenelm shuddered, and a vague horror filled his breast.

"That poor feller war dead," whispered Dakota Dan. "He staked his life at cards, and lost all."

"My God, Dan! if this is life in New Mexico, I want none of it," said St. Kenelm. "Mississippi towns are nothing compared with Conejos."

"Oh, this is all right, major," responded the old ranger, sarcastically; "this is a spot of our republican government—our galorous star-spangled American eagle. Judicious legislation brought about this millinium. Give Congress time and it will annex ole Mexico and Purgatory next. Humph! this thing of a hen havin' more chicks than she can cover, I don't b'lieve in. What's Congress and the law-makers know 'bout that man bein' killed? What does the local authorities keer? Ah, major! I love my country—have fit and died for it, but I don't like some things 'bout her internal machinery—the way her laws are executed. Thar's the Utah poligamists—a mere handful—that for years have defied our laws, our judges and our cannon. And then, just think of that insane Ingin policy! Oh, Lord! it makes my very ha'r blush for man's ignorance of the Ingin."

"I am not an advocate of the humanitarian Indian policy, Dan, for the reason it is not a success," replied St. Kenelm.

"I am inclined to think that a few such men as you, well armed and equipped, would do more toward keeping the Indians under subjection than all the Quakers in America."

"Thar, major!" exclaimed Dan, bringing his bony palm

down upon his companion's knee, "you have hit it plumb-center!"

By this time the house had been cleared of all evidences of the late murder, and general "order" restored.

The gamblers had all resumed their seats at the tables, and business went on as before.

Missouri Moll, with an air of relief, began his pacing up and down the hall, imploring any one to become a victim to his pugilistic wrath.

Several times his savage eyes rested upon our friends, but no direct challenge was given them.

"Who is that desperado, Dan?" asked Major St. Kenelm.

"He's a stage-driver they call Missouri Moll," replied the old ranger. "He drives from Conejos to somewhar south and back, once a week. He's a great bully, and every one of them krittlers hangin' round him would kiss his feet, that 'd kick 'em the next moment. If he'd whip every man here, they'd fight for him the next minute becase he's Missouri Moll, the King of the Stage—Hullo tharl!"

At this juncture the door was opened and a new-comer entered the room. He was a young man—in fact a mere boy, whose timid, unsophisticated looks told that he was entirely out of place. The boy had a clear dark eye, it is true, and was really "good"-looking, but his ill-fitting suit of dark gray, his awkward movements, and his bashful, half-frightened looks, told that he was from the "rural districts" of the States. He had doubtless become fired with the spirit of Western life, had run away from home, and had called in at the "Swill-Pail" to make observations.

Dan and St. Kenelm saw that he was a stranger, and for a moment he became a focus upon which all eyes were centered. And at length Missouri Moll espied him, and smacking his lips in high gusto, exclaimed:

"A young one—a tender morsel for my supper," and prancing up to the boy, he slapped him upon the shoulder and continued: "How are you, sonny? What's your name? Whar did ye come from? Tired, ar'n't you? A little scemethin' to take will help you, so come right up, bub, and take yer fust drink with gallant Missouri Moll, King of the Stage, of whom you've heard, I dare say—read about in yer Sunday-school books."

"I never drink, sir, thank you," replied the youth, half terrified.

"You've no business in here, then," replied the bully.

"I know it; but I came in through mistake."

"Yes, yes, younker; I made that mistake, too, so come up and drink—you must."

"No, I will not," the boy replied, firmly.

"But you shall, sir," the driver said, fiercely; "I'll be teetotally cussed if I don't pour it down your throat. I'll hold your nose, my babe, and pour it right down, and you'll thank me fur it, some day. I say, ole Slop-tub, behind the bar, thar, fill me up a mug of hot liquor. This boy must drink."

"Major," said Dakota Dan, in a low, solemn tone; "that boy sha'n't be imposed upon. Before that liquor goes down his throat, either that desperado or Dakota Dan will be dead. If I fall, major, I hope you'll git through the mountains safe."

Before St. Kenelm could reply, the old ranger rose, and with a deadly fire in his steel-gray eyes, advanced to the side of the trembling boy.

CHAPTER XV.

RED ROB'S RAID.

MISSOURI MOLL soon returned with the liquor.

"Here, boy," he said, "drink this down and be a man."

"See here, ole hoss," said Dakota Dan, interposing, "if this boy wants to drink, I've nothin' to say, but if he don't want to, you sha'n't force it onto him."

"The roarin' demon!" exclaimed the bully, in apparent astonishment, at the same time tossing glass, liquor and all over his shoulder behind him, regardless of whom they struck, "what's this? A man, or a mummy? What little, ole, dried-up institution are you that dares to put in a lip whar Missouri Moll, the King of the Stage, reigns supreme? Why, man, I shall grind, pulverize to dust and sprinkle over this floor your withered carcass."

"I don't know anything 'bout your powers to grind up

folks," responded Dan, coolly, "but I'm determined you sha'n't carry out your threat with that boy."

"Durned if I don't show you, ole dry-bones," roared the bully; "see here, ole Dutch oven, send over another mug of 'strangulation.'"

The last words were directed to the bartender's wife, who at once filled the order, when a dozen eager hands flew to the bar to bear the glass to their master, Missouri Moll.

As soon as the glass was placed in the stage-driver's hands, the bully advanced toward the shrinking youth and reached out and attempted to seize his nose between his forefinger and thumb. But at the same instant the form of Dakota Dan straightened up and his bony fist was planted directly between the eyes of Missouri Moll. The driver dropped like a log to the floor, spilling the liquor as he went down. But with a roar like that of a mad bull, he sprung to his feet and squared off, tore open his collar, shoved up his sleeves and was then ready to exterminate the old ranger.

The boy burst into a peal of laughter.

"The Lord e-ternal!" hissed the desperado, "I'll make you squeak outen t'other side of your mouth. I'll extarminate both of you—"

"Go in, King Molly, I'll back you," cried Manuel Chicahlo, the very individual whom the desperado had knocked down a few minutes before; "I'll 'tend to that boy—I'll l'arn him how to insult the King of the Stage—I'll l'arn him manners, the insignificant little son of—"

The villain's low, abusive words were here cut short by the youth's fist, which, quicker than thought, was planted on the wretch's mouth, knocking him back against the bar with terrible violence.

The youth's blow proved the signal for a general attack upon himself and Dakota Dan.

And, seeing the danger of his friend and the boy, St. Kenelm, springing forward, became involved in the fight.

High above the din of the conflict suddenly arose the piercing scream of a whistle. It issued from the midst of the crowd. It caused an involuntary lull in the confusion.

The next moment a yell was heard outside. The tramping of hooved feet was heard upon the street. The sounds approached. The door was burst suddenly open, and, to the horror of all, a masked horseman galloped into the saloon! In his hand he held a cocked revolver. He was immediately followed by another and still another; until a dozen mounted and masked horsemen were in the room.

Terror swayed the crowd.

"Red Rob! Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent, is upon us!" burst from the lips of one.

It was enough. A panic seized the crowd, and a general confused rush was made for the door and the windows. The road-agents opened fire upon the confused mass. In a few moments the saloon was deserted by all save the outlaws and three dead men.

Dakota Dan, St. Kenelm and the boy were also gone.

A yell that fairly shook the building burst from the lips of the robbers as they ranged their animals around in front of the bar, and called lustily for "drinks."

But no one answered their summons.

Finally one of the party dismounted and went behind the bar to wait on the others. To his surprise he found the bar-tender, and his wife there, curled up under a sleeping-bunk.

The fat couple were routed out, and by strong argument in the shape of a cocked revolver, were persuaded to set out the drinks and cigars until all were satisfied. Then one of the robbers demanded:

"What's the bill?"

The quaking, terrified German looked wild.

"What's the bill, I ask?"

"Mine Cott, nodings!" gasped the man, "if you leave jist quick. Mine frow is almost to death scared, and trembles in her pody mooch fast."

"That's not the question: what do we owe you?" demanded the masked road-agent.

"Two dollars pay for all, but I no charge you if you go fast hurry away."

Despite his remonstrances, the outlaw paid the bill, and without further annoyance rode out of the saloon, and galloped away toward the mountains.

By this time, however, Conejos was wild with excitement. The name of Red Rob was upon every lip. But in the midst of all, no one thought of attempting the capture of the young outlaw. Self-defense was the only thought that filled the minds of the terrified populace, for all they had no need of fear. They possessed nothing that the outlaws wanted—

nothing that they could make away with, and joy followed the brief reign of terror, when it had become known that the road-agents, on leaving the saloon, had taken their departure from the village.

The list of casualties at the saloon were four men killed—including the one shot at the gambling table—and several wounded. Among the latter was Missouri Moll. He had received a wound in the fight with Dakota Dan and the boy that was likely to lay him up for several weeks, as in fact it did.

Dan and St. Kenelm escaped with but few bruises; but it left their minds in a state of fear. They were afraid that their participancy in the saloon fight would involve them in future trouble; and the fact of their being at the saloon at all would be instrumental in causing the withdrawal of the friendship of the better class of the citizens.

"But we've got to watch 'em, major," Dan said, as they wended their way back toward camp; "they're a set of devils, and thar's no tellin' which side you're fightin' on, nor whose friends you're strikin'. Oh, Lor! if I'd jist had ole Patience, my mare, and Humility, my dorg, thar in that saloon, the Triangle 'd been complete, and gracious man! no tellin' what 'd 'a' happened."

"I am really sorry that we got into any trouble at all, Dan," said St. Kenelm.

"So am I, major; and I reckon I'm to blame fur it all; but I couldn't help it. If thar's anything on earth that I'll fight fur, it's for women and children, for I war a chile onc't, and my ole mother war a woman. When that boy came in thar, lookin' innocent-like, I couldn't stand and see that 'tar nal big bully impose on him. But, mortal p'ison, major! a volkaner of strength and fightosity slumbered in that boy. Ole Patience, my mare, couldn't kick harder'n he struck that 'ere Mexican; and I never see'd Humility, my dorg, flir around spryer than he did."

"Do you know how he came out of the fight?" asked the major.

"Never see'd him arter we closed in. I hope he got through safe, though; for I tell ye, major, I took to that boy as natural like as water runs down hill. He's nobody's greeny, I'll bet you. I think all his rural appearances war put on. But be that as it may, whenever we meet him ag'in, we'll meet a good, brave friend."

"Yes, we assumed the risk of our lives for him," replied his companion; "but, Dan, it appears that one of Red Rob's men was in the saloon at the time we were."

"Even so, major; and the moment the fight began, he called his pals by that ear-splittin' whistle. Snakes of Jerusalem! I thought judgment had come when I see'd the reckless devils come a-gallop'in' right into the saloon and go to shootin' and bangin' right and left, regardless of friends or foes. I war jist sailin' in handsomely on Missouri Moll, churnin' his physeognomy in splendid style, when they came in. But that boy, major—did you notice him?—did ye see his eyes? Major, I, Daniel Rackback, do firmly, positively and honestly believe that that very identical boy war Red Rob!"

"Indeed! I have thought so myself, Dan. Probably we'll find out soon. He may give our camp a call before he leaves the country," replied St. Kenelm, uneasily.

At this juncture they reached camp, and found that their friends were entirely ignorant of Red Rob's raid upon Conejoa.

CHAPTER XVI

AUNT SHADY'S TROUBLES.

GREAT excitement prevailed in Conejos on the morning following Red Rob's raid upon the saloon. Of three men that had been killed, not one had come to his death by a bullet. In every case, knives had been the fatal weapons. Several, however, had been wounded by the hoofs of the robbers' horses that thundered so suddenly in upon them. But the most startling of all were the placards posted on every road converging at Conejos, and upon which was written this notice:

"Notice—any one injuring a hair of the heads of the old man and his friend who visited the 'Swill-Pail' last night, will be shot without trial or jury. I am responsible for all that occurred in the fight there last night, and to me let the injured look for satisfaction.

RED ROB."

This seemed to renew the fear and excitement of the populace. All even feared to question each other as to the old man and friend referred to. They knew how fruitless had been the efforts of the military to capture this band of daring robbers, and so the very name of Red Rob was sufficient to impel obedience to the wishes of the young road-agent. It soon leaked out, however, that the "old man" referred to was the redoubtable Dakota Dan, the ranger; and "his friend," Major St. Kenelm. This discovery threw some suspicions around the emigrant train—in fact, led to the belief that it, or some of its members at least, were in some manner connected with the outlaws.

But this was all set aside in the minds of the law-abiding people, what few there were in Conejos, by Dakota Dan, who went boldly into the village and made known the truth of the whole affair.

This course proved a master-stroke of policy, for it at once drew either the respect or fear of the citizens over to the emigrants. Dakota Dan was lionized by those who had been his enemies, but the old ranger shook his head dubiously. He would not be caught in a trap by the flattery of such men as he had seen in the Conejos saloon.

The boy for whom he and St. Kenelm had fought could not be found, and the ranger now became satisfied that he was Red Rob.

The days wore as quietly away as could be expected, and the time for our friends to resume their journey drew near. Before their departure, however, an entertainment was to be given by the citizens of Conejos in honor of their brief sojourn. This was to be a *baile* (a ball) or platform dance in the open air, the chief amusement of the Mexican belles and beaux. It was not to be a *fandango*, a name which many writers, through ignorance, associate with all Mexican dances, but a ball of different dances—the American cotillion, the Mexican cotillion and round dances.

Through maidenly curiosity, Octavia St. Kenelm and Maggie Boswell were both anxious to attend the ball, but their friends held the propriety of their going under careful consideration. They grew very uneasy as the time for the ball approached through fear the decision would be in the negative; and Octavia finally resolved to appeal to Aunt Shady and have her exert her influence upon her brother Al.

She found the old negress seated alone, some little distance from camp, weeping.

"Why, Aunt Shady, what in the world is the matter with you?" asked the maiden, seeing the tears chasing each other down her sable cheeks.

"Oh, honey, dear!" sobbed the old woman, "I's most awful sorry in my ole heart."

"What has given you trouble and sorrow, Aunt Shady?"

"Oh, Lor' bless you, honey. I war jist thinking 'bout ole Kaintucky shore, and my little pickaninny—my little boy dat—"

"Your little boy? Why, Aunt, I never knew you were married."

"In course I was, chile; but my ole man he died, and my little Henry Clay, he war put up on de auction-block one day and sold, and den I nebber sees him no more. He war only five years ole when he war sole, Octaby; and 'bout de same time your ole father bought me. Dat Henry Clay chile war de sweetest, darlin'est little feller dat you ebber see. His ole mudder's heart war proud ob de little toad. He war jis' as smart as a cricket. But oh, Octaby, when ole massa told me dat he sell my little Henry Clay, ebberthing turn black, den green, and I tried to hide my little chile in my heart; but I couldn't, and when he war taken away, it seemed I would die dead. De little feller looked back, held up his hands and cried, and called for his ole mudder; but no one but me and God, honey, heard dem baby cries. And so he war taken away and I war left alone. But den when your fadder bought me, I wer'n't so lonesome, for den I hab my little Octaby to love. But now comes anudder sorry—an awful secret, honey."

"An awful secret, aunty? Goodness! I thought you were always the happiest old woman on earth—without troubles or cares, and now here you are with one of those mysterious things called secrets."

"Yes, honey; and it all concerns yoahself," and Aunt Shady burst into a flood of tears that almost melted Octavia's heart with pity.

Dropping on her knees at the old woman's feet with tears in her dark eyes, the maiden asked:

"Is the secret of which you speak concerning me, Aunt?"

"Yes, chile, al concernin you. But I can't tell it to you yit, Octaby. I'll tell all 'bout it some day. I promised your ole father and 'loved ole Massa St. Kenelm—not dat one what sole my little Henry Clay—when he went away dat—"

"Went away?" exclaimed Octavia; "is my father not dead?"

"Don't people go away when dey die, honey. My ole man is 'way up in heaben wid de Lor', and dar's whar dis ole soul 'spects to go some day. But when ole massa went away, as I war gwine to say, he said: 'Shady, if I—if sumthin' don't happen to Octaby inside of twelve years, you can tell her the secret of her life—that is, if you are living—twelve years from dis very day and not before. I promised him all dat.'"

"And does brother Al not know the secret of which you speak?" asked Octavia.

"No, chile, he known uffin' 'bout it. When he know de whole thing, I know it 'll make his heart sad. Oh, deah!"

"You'll tell me what it is, won't you, Aunt?" Octavia asked, looking up into the old woman's face.

"Not yit, chile; de twelve years will not be out yit fur four long weeks; den I tell it all, though it break my ole heart, and I 'spects it will break my poor, darling Octaby's heart and Massa Al's too. But I promised de old massa I'd do it, and de good angel ob my soul recorded my words on de big book in heaben."

For a moment both the old woman and her young mistress were silent—plunged deep in the labyrinths of thought. Finally the negress continued:

"And den dar am anudder trouble in my heart, Octaby."

"Another trouble?" repeated Octavia, in painful surprise; "you are the embodiment of secrets and troubles, Aunt. I wish I could relieve you of some of them."

"Law-sakes-alive! Bress your soul, honey, you're jis' speakin' right outen your heart now, Octaby. Now tell me, chile, ar'n't you in love?"

"Why, what a question, Aunt Shady. Is that what troubles you?"

"Hain't dat enuff to? Ebber since dat day dat you met dat young ranger boy, on de road to Cornjos, you've been kind a thoughtful and dreamy-like. I know you love dat fellah you talk 'bout, now don't you?"

Octavia laughed a clear, musical laugh. Aunt Shady, too, in that hearty, good-natured way of hers, adding, with a knowing shake of the head:

"You can't fool your ole Aunt, chile. She young once too—"

"And loved some one, I dare say," put in the maiden.

"No, not ebbery young squirt dat come along, for, chile, your ole Aunt used to be as gay a colahed gal as dar war in all Kaintucky. And dar war a dozen—oh, law-sakes, yes; a hundred young colahed chaps tryin' to shine round your Aunt, but I jist up and sack dem ebbery last one. But dar war one, Sam Johnsing, a gay young nigger, dat kept a-coming and a-coming still, and at las' yer Aunt Shady got her dander up and she jis' took dat nigger by de collah and sent him a-bouncing. Den I married one ob massa's niggers dat war a good man, and loved de Lor'. And dat's jist de way I'd do wid dat young ranger boy, chile, if I war you."

"I may never see him again, Aunt," replied Octavia, with a roguish smile. "Moreover, I don't know whether he wants to marry, or loves the—"

"Oh, pshaw! you don't understand what I say," interrupted the negress.

"Well, it don't make any difference. The young man will not know where to find me when we get over the mountains."

"Law-sakes-alive! You can't hide from a fellah dat's lovin' you. Love in a man has an instinct dat's like de nose ob a bloodhound. Why, didn't I hide in de ole dry well one't when Sam Johnsing war a-coming? and didn't he walk right slap-dab up to de well and look down and see me and laff? Den I fired up and says I: 'Sam Johnsing, what fur you come here?' and he said, he war dry, and went dar to git a drink, but, tut! it wa'n't so, honey."

—and Aunt Shady gave her head a disdainful toss—"for it wa'n't no well at all—nebber had been—only a deep hole de big boys had dug playin' hunt gold."

"Aunt, you speak as though the ranger loved me. Who knows that he has ever given me a second thought since we parted?"

"I does, dat's who. No, youngster wid a spark ob true

manhood in his bosom could see you and not fall in lub wid you, honey."

"You are very flattering in your compliments, Aunty."

"Well, honest-bright, Octaby, don't you lub dat boy?"

"Aunty Shady," said Octavia, seriously, "the image of that young man is constantly before me when I am asleep and awake. Sometimes I find myself looking around in hopes of seeing him. I am always expecting something, I do not know what; and now, if this is love, then I love that young ranger and am not ashamed to—"

"Yes, dat's lub—de very fust symptons ob de disease chile. Your ole Aunty knows how it act on de constitushing. Dar am always sumthing wanted, but no telling what, when one's in lub."

"Changing the subject, Aunty, won't you prevail on brother Al to take me to the ball to-night? I just want to see how the young folks in this miserable country appear."

"I expected dat; but den I war young onc't, too, and I tells you, Octaby, dar wa'n't a colahed gal in all Kaintucky dat could beat your Aunty at a colahed hoe-down, as we used to call 'em, dem days. I could jist beat de world dancing juba, or cutting de pigeon-wing, and 'xpects I could skip 'round right lively yit. Yes, I likes to see one be young when dey can. Massa Al will let you go—said he would go wid you and Miss Boswell, but he told me not to tell you, so I won't, honey," and the old woman went off into a merry outburst of laughter.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEXICAN BAILE.

OCTAVIA was highly pleased over her prospect of going to the *baile*, and yet she was seriously impressed by the revelation of the negress concerning the secret of her life. She thought it very strange that a mystery should cloud her life that had glided along so smoothly ever since she could remember. She wondered what the secret could possibly be, and as she could conceive no answer, she quieted her emotions by the self-assurance that it was nothing for which she herself was responsible.

As to her love for the young ranger, she experienced no regrets in admitting to herself the truth of the matter—that, from the moment she looked into his eyes, she loved him. She could not help it. But where now was the object of her love? Would she ever see him again?

These and many other questions arose in her mind, but being unanswerable, they filled her heart with a vague, painful longing.

The evening was finally ushered in, and with the first shades of twilight, the stirring sound of the music of violins floated out upon the balmy air. It came from the clump of trees about a hundred yards south of camp, where the platform for the *baile* had been constructed. The sound rose and fell with the variations of the tune, now high, now low, now soft, now strong—all swelling forth with a sweet, enchanting melody. It roused the spirits of the young emigrants, and the old ones, too, for that matter. Aunt Shady was taken with a sudden fit of youthful enthusiasm and began to "cut the pigeon-wing" with all the wonted spiritedness of a maid of twenty.

The sound of fluttering feet keeping time to the music soon became mingled with the ravishing strains that floated up from the grove. It was an inviting temptation—one that youth could not resist.

Major St. Kenelm, accompanied by his sweetheart and sister, went down to the scene of festivity and amusement. Some of the men had preceded them, others came after.

Several large bonfires contributed their light to the occasion. The platform upon which the dance was held, and its surroundings, were lit up with a glare as if of the mid-day sun.

A row of seats was arranged around the edge of the platform for the dancers' accommodation, and to one of these the major conducted Maggie and Octavia, and seated himself between them.

A number of couples were already on the floor, engaged in a slow waltz. This the major considered fortunate, as it attracted much of the attention from them, and the maidens were saved the embarrassment of running the gantlet of fifty or more pairs of inquisitive eyes.

St. Kenelm surveyed the crowd with a critical eye. Those that took part in the amusements of the evening were orderly-looking people, well-dressed, well-behaved and courteous, that is, in their way of viewing such things; although they were somewhat at variance with our friends' views of social manners. There were a number of bright-eyed *senoritas* there, dressed in their short frocks and slippers; and young men of different nationalities, trigged out in the gay, flashy suit of the *ranchero*, and others peculiar to the Spanish-Mexican youths of the country.

Outside, where lurked dim shadows among the trees, were congregated clumps of spectators, mostly such roughs and desperadoes as composed the crowd at the "Swill-Pail," the previous night. And several of them St. Kenelm recognized, but with their bearded faces were associated no very pleasant recollections. However, they were all quiet and orderly.

Several young men, handsomely attired, came in from adjoining towns and ranches. A few of them were strangers there, but this seemed to give the party little concern, and the youths were admitted without a word to the platform, where they at once entered into the full spirit of the occasion. And if there was any preference shown by the *senoritas* for the assembled youths, it seemed to be in favor of those who were strangers. In fact, the maidens seemed to vie with each other in making the young strangers' evening at Conejos one of pleasure.

Our three friends studied every action and movement of the people closely. They saw that they possessed none of those rigid formalities of politeness and social etiquette to which they had been accustomed; and which, to some, makes fashionable society burdensome. All acted out their natures in a mutual sociability. Their gallantry and sentiments were the spontaneous outburst of their natures. Introductions were entirely dispensed with. If a gentleman wished a partner for the next waltz or cotillion, and he was a stranger, he had only to select his lady and make his wishes known. It seemed an incumbent duty for her to accept, at least she always did, and all went on merrily as ever.

Our friends, by close observation, soon became posted in all the particulars pertaining to society in this far south-western land.

Both Octavia and Maggie loved to dance, but they felt it would be useless for them to attempt those strange figures and steps among those born dancers, whose women were perfection itself in the art—their movements so graceful; their rising, falling, bowing, sinking and waving of handkerchiefs so in keeping with the tune that they seemed to float upon the varying waves of the music.

The "proprietor" of the *baile* waited upon St. Kenelm and his fair companions, and invited them to take a part in the dancing. They declined on the ground of being unaccustomed to their steps and dances.

"Si, *senor*," replied the proprietor, "your American dances—your cotillions and waltzes we dance sometimes, and a set for a cotillion will soon be called especially for your pleasure."

"Thank you, sir," replied St. Kenelm, "but we only came here as spectators, and have no desire to expose our ignorance of the 'light fantastic toe.'"

"No excuses, *senor*," replied the Mexican, with a smile. "I will make an announcement for a cotillion soon, and hope you will respond."

The proprietor glided away and the dancing went on.

St. Kenelm, and the maidens at his side, continued to watch the graceful forms, whirling, circling and floating away in the giddy mazes of the waltz.

Suddenly the major felt his sister clutch his arm with a violent start, while a little cry of surprise burst from her lips.

"Why, sister," he said, "what is the matter?"

"There *he* is, brother—the young ranger who rode with me—who saved the train from an Indian massacre," replied Octavia, her face flushed and her lips quivering with emotion.

"Where?" asked the young man.

"That is he standing on the corner of the stage with the embroidered Spencer jacket and gold-banded hat," said Octavia.

Albert St. Kenelm had no difficulty in selecting the form of the person referred to. It was that of a youth of perhaps eighteen years of age. He was dressed in a suit of costly fabric highly ornamented, and after the style of a Mexican *ranchero*.

This youth had just arrived, and his handsome face, his fine form, and unobtrusive martial air, set off in his flashy uniform, rendered him a conspicuous object for many inquisitive and critical eyes.

When St. Kenelm had singled him out, the youth stood with the side of his face toward him, yet with this partial view the major became vaguely impressed with the belief that there was something familiar about the boy's features; but to save him, he could not recall the face from the depths of the past.

However, he kept his eyes upon the youth, whom he, as well as old Aunt Shady, knew had won his sister's heart. He saw the young lad run his eyes carefully over the assembly, and when they finally caught sight of Octavia's face—when their eyes met, there was that mutual recognition of two loving hearts visible in the faint smile, the drooping eyelids and the momentary embarrassment of each.

The young ranger's search seemed ended now, and he turned his eyes upon the dancers.

St. Kenelm studied his face closely, then said, in a reflective tone:

"He is a manly-looking youth, Octavia, and I have certainly met him before. But it was not in Missouri, nor in St. Louis, nor on the way here, I am sure."

"I know I never saw him until the day before we reached Conejos," said Octavia.

"Let me see," continued the major, thoughtfully, "wasn't it the night I was at the 'Swill-Pail' saloon that I saw him?—yes, by heavens, it was! That is the very country-boy that came in dressed in citizen's clothing, and looking so 'green' and awkward, and whose presence there got Dan and I into trouble. Yes, it's the very same lad."

"Are you sure of this, brother?" Octavia asked.

"I am positive of it now, and shall manage to speak to him soon. That boy is a verification of the old adage, 'Still waters run deep.' Since you and he exchanged glances, sister, I know full well the feeling that exists between you and him. You love him, Octavia, and before your acquaintance goes any further, I must know who he is, where he belongs, and in fact all about him. I observe that he is the center of an attraction that seems very inquisitive, but he meets their impertinent glances without flinching. He is the very boy, yet how different he appears, from when Missouri Moll tried to force the liquor on him. I think now there was a purpose in the unsophisticated look he assumed when he entered the saloon. It is queer these people don't inquire into the character of a stranger before he is permitted to take part in the dance. I dare say he will soon march up to some Mexican belle and lead her right out upon the floor without the least ceremony."

At this juncture the music ceased and the dancers sought their seats.

Then the announcement was made that a "set for a cotillion would form on the floor."

Before the words were scarcely uttered, the young stranger was seen making his way across the staging toward our three friends.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

As he approached, the young man put out his hand toward St. Kenelm, saying:

"Senor, I am supremely happy to see you here, and to know that you escaped unharmed."

"I presume I know," replied St. Kenelm, grasping the youth's hand, "what you have reference to."

"The saloon," said the lad.

"The same," responded the major, "though I scarcely recognize the bashful boy in citizen's gray in yourself."

The youth smiled, and, turning to Octavia, lifted his hat, and said:

"Senorita, I congratulate you on your escape from the savages the evening I met you on the road."

"Thank you, sir," Octavia replied, blushing crimson almost; "and to you, I believe, is owing the salvation of our whole train."

"It is a pleasure to know that I was near enough to be of service to the train. But, fair senorita, you and I are Americans, and Americans dance cotillions. Would you honor me with your company, this dance?"

"With pleasure," replied Octavia, half unconsciously, and,

rising to her feet, she accepted the proffered arm of the young cavalier, and was escorted to the floor.

Major St. Kenelm did not approve of this act of his sister. To him it seemed too familiar for such limited acquaintance. But then he saw that Octavia's girlish infatuation had led her away, and while he decided not to reprove her for this first unbecoming act, he determined it should not be repeated on that or any other occasion. He felt in no way indignant toward the youth, for he but followed the too familiar customs of the country. Moreover, he, as well as the whole train, was under a life-long obligation to the boy who had, upon Octavia's own evidence, saved the whole train from an Indian massacre.

The music finally struck up, and Octavia and her companion were soon whirling away in the dance.

The major and his pretty sweetheart watched them with an admiring gaze through the whole dance. When the music at length ceased, the youth escorted Octavia to her former seat by her brother's side, and thanked her with the fervent gallantry of a young knight, for the honor she had conferred upon him. Then, with a polite bow to all, he turned and moved away toward the opposite end of the platform.

He was near the middle of the floor, when a rock, hurled by an unseen hand, whizzed past his head and struck the ground several paces beyond. Another stone fell on the floor at his feet.

The youth stopped on the floor and gazed around him, with a calm, defiant look, for the authors of the cowardly act.

"That's him! that's him!" suddenly burst from the lips of one of the rowdies standing off at one side, "that's the very lark that caused the trouble t'other night at the saloon."

The boy advanced to the edge of the platform, and, folding his arms upon his breast, said, in a calm, defiant tone:

"Villains, I defy you!"

For a moment a general row was threatened. The roughs gathered in a body at one side, brandishing knives and pistols and uttering fearful execrations.

The manager of the baile advanced to the edge of the platform and addressed the rabble in kind words, begging them not to raise a disturbance in the presence of the females.

But he was only answered by clamorous demands for the boy, and, like wolves, gradually growing bolder, they edged and crowded toward the platform.

They held the balance of power in point of numbers, and a knowledge of this fact emboldened them.

"We want that boy," shouted one of the desperadoes; "he's the very chap that caused the death of Zeke Tarlo, Tom Eakers and Long John t'other night at the 'Swill-Pail.' We don't want to raise a fuss here, but we do want that young, white-livered cuss, and, what's more, we'll have him or die."

"Gentlemen, or rather rowdies," said the youth, advancing to the edge of the platform nearest to them, "I'm afraid you'll die, for you can not have your wish gratified. I did not enter the saloon the other night to raise a disturbance, and so I am not responsible for the death of your friends. I sincerely regret that there was any blood shed at all; though, I daresay, Conejos and the world would be better off to-day if you had all been killed. I did not come here to-night for a fight, and at any other time I am willing to meet you whenever and wherever you may appoint, and adjust this matter—this grudge you hold against me for fancied injuries."

"Hear, will ye?" roared an outlaw, "the young squirt talks as though he was a host. But, that won't work, my gay and festive young cuss. You can't intimidate us fellers that's on our muscle. You've got to walk-the-chalk right out of thar, or else we'll snake ye out by the heels."

By this time the confusion among the dancers amounted almost to a panic. Maggie and Octavia were trembling with terror. A commotion of fear swayed the crowd. The desperadoes advanced still closer and closer toward the brave, unflinching boy.

"See here, villains!" the youth suddenly exclaimed, in a stern, resolute tone, holding above his head, between his thumb and forefinger, a small silver whistle which all could see distinctly, "if you persist in a row here, I will make it a bloody one for you. You will not get off as you did at the saloon the other night. You have scorned my power—you have mocked my youth; but let me tell you, desperadoes, that one blast upon that whistle will bring a troop of armed men upon you. I am Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent, and my men are within call—yea, even within sound of my voice!"

These words fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of those who heard them. The outlaws recoiled from the presence of the youth as if from the mouth of a cannon about to be fired. The dancers became panic-stricken and fled from the platform in wild confusion.

At the end of one minute but a single person remained upon the platform or within the glare of the bonfires.

And that person was Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent.

A smile of grim triumph lit up the face of the young outlaw; then he uttered a series of "clucking" whistles, when a riderless horse—a beautiful cream-colored or "buck-skin" mustang stud, with a white mane and tail, and handsomely caparisoned, galloped from the darkness into the glare of the lights.

The youth spoke to it; it came alongside of the platform; the young outlaw mounted it and galloped away. And soon the clatter of four score of hooved feet was heard, retreating from the lower end of the grove, in the direction of the mountains.

CHAPTER XIX.

ZELLA AT THE GROTTO.

A wail as if of agony burst from the lips of the negro boy, Slyly, when he saw Asa Sheridan stagger and fall in a dead faint in the mountain grotto, whither he had conducted him.

"Oh, de good Lord hab marcy!" the youth cried, rolling upon the earth and tearing at his head as though a nest of hornets had attacked him; "what will dis poo'nigger boy do? He's dead as sure as de Lord's in heaven, and de young missus told me—boo-hoo!—Oh, de Lord help me!"

A thought appeared to enter the youth's mind all at once, and, springing to his feet, he glided out of the grotto, and sped away down the mountain steep with all the speed of a Tyrolean youth on his native Alps.

But a brief period had elapsed ere he returned, followed by a female.

A cry of joy burst from the boy's lips, and he executed a leap into the air that would have done credit to a gymnast, as he entered the grotto. For in the dim glow of the light he had left burning in the retreat he saw that Sheridan had recovered from his swoon, and was just finishing the painful task of binding up his wound.

"Oh, Missus Zella!" he shouted, clapping his hands in an excess of joy; "de young man's come to—he's alive again. Ki-yi, missus, and ar'n't dis nigger chile tickled plum to death?"

"You were wounded, were you, stranger?" asked the sweet, low voice of the woman, advancing toward the young man, and pushing back the shawl that was thrown hood-like over her head.

Sheridan raised his eyes and beheld the beautiful face that he had seen at the window of the "judgment hall," the face of the angel, who had been instrumental in delivering him from the dungeon of the ruins. A thrill of indescribable joy shot through his whole frame, and his heart took new courage and grew stronger in that feeling which the first glimpse of her fair face had awakened within it.

The sweet, blue eyes of the girl looked down upon him with a light of angelic serenity shining from their azure depths. The pretty face was flushed and clothed in an expression of the greatest anxiety. She was excited and nearly out of breath in consequence of her hasty ascent of the steep mountain side.

Sheridan comprehended the whole situation at a glance. Frightened by his fainting, Slyly had hurried away and brought his young mistress there; and seeing the maiden was alarmed, the wounded man hastened to relieve her of her fears.

"Yes," he replied, with an air of relief, "I received a rifle-wound as I sped across the open space, between the ruins and the chaparral, at the foot of the mountains. But, my dear, unknown young friend, the wound is so very slight that I am almost ashamed to admit that I fainted when I entered this grotto. I am very sorry that you have been put to unnecessary trouble after doing what you have for me."

"Then you know who I am?" the maiden said, gazing earnestly into the young man's face.

"I suppose you are Zella. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir; I am Zella."

"The same whose face I saw at the window of the 'judgment hall'?"

"The same."

"God bless you then, Zella!" the young man exclaimed, thankfully; "you have been an angel of mercy to me."

"I have done only what I considered it my duty to do—what my heart's instinct, my woman's sense of mercy guided me in."

"Heart's instinct?" repeated Sheridan to himself, his own heart giving a great bound; "that I would call love. Can this angel of mercy—this pure, modest flower hidden away here amid the San Juan ruins—can it be possible that she cares for me?"

His mental questioning was here interrupted by the sweet voice of Zella, who, turning to Slyly, said:

"Slyly, you will go out and keep watch. A close search is being made by the men, and some of them may have seen us, and will attempt to follow. Keep within speaking distance of the grotto."

"I'll do dat, Missus Zella," and the ebon-colored boy bounded out into the darkness.

Then Zella turned to Asa Sheridan and said:

"You may think it immodest of me, young stranger, in coming to you here. But Slyly told me you were wounded and bleeding to death. I knew he could do nothing; so, I came myself."

"For which I shall never cease to be grateful to you, Miss—Miss Zella," Asa replied, in a tone of the deepest interest. "Although my wound is simply a flesh-wound which I succeeded in binding up alone, I feel as thankful to you, for your good intention in coming here, as though you had saved my life. The principle of the good Samaritan is all the same. But, Zella, I am astonished to find a single rose blooming among so many deadly thorns."

"I do not understand you, Mr.—"

"Sheridan," said the young man, "Asa Sheridan is the name. I had reference to yourself among so many—so—"

"I comprehend now, Mr. Sheridan," answered the fair girl, sadly, and with a mortified look; "but, do not touch upon that subject now. It is painful to me. I will visit you again, if you so desire, before you leave here; then will tell you all."

"Yes, Zella, I desire that you do come again. I am willing to remain your prisoner here until you tell me to go, if you will be my jailer."

A confused smile lit up the maiden's fair, lovely face.

"You are extravagant of compliments, Mr. Sheridan," she replied, "but I do not want you to consider yourself anybody's prisoner. I was satisfied that you would suffer violence if not death, and as my soul revolts against the commission of crime, I resolved to save you. You may have to remain here a month, no telling. This grotto can be reached by two ways only—one the path you came, and the other by climbing up a succession of dangerous ledges. Your enemies will hunt you down if possible, but whenever they give up the search and all danger is past, you will be so informed and guided away to safety. I will see that you want for nothing. Slyly is out hunting and rambling among the mountain hills most of his time, and so I can send him here without his absence being suspected. Do not hesitate to entrust any word for me to him."

"I will not, Zella; but how am I ever to repay you for this kindness? I am nothing but a penniless miner with only the clothes on my back. The Indians robbed me of all I possessed."

"Never mind, Mr. Sheridan," Zella smiled, rising to her feet, and drawing her shawl around her shoulders. "I am not doing this for money. So let that not trouble you."

"Are you going so soon?" Sheridan demanded.

"I must go. My absence may arouse suspicions. Good-night, Mr. Sheridan."

Before he could speak again she was gone, and Asa Sheridan was alone. The young man now threw himself upon the couch arranged for him, and gave way to a train of reflections. He reviewed the night's experience. It was full of horrors, perils and sufferings, but, amid all, the sweet, angelic face of Zella shone out like the beacon star of hope. His thoughts finally reverted to his companions, Basil Walrayment and Nathan Wolfe. But, as to where they now were, and what had been their fate, he could form no conception. He had heard sentences passed upon each, it is true, and had heard Slyly say the old man had escaped, but this was all. His mind, and heart, too, had been so con-

fused when Zella was there, that he never once thought of inquiring after them. And now that he was alone, a spirit of restlessness took possession of him that lasted through the remainder of that terrible night.

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE IN A MOUNTAIN GROTTO.

THE coming of day dispelled much of the gloom and bitter recollections of the night from the mind of Asa Sheridan, and feeling like a new man he arose from his couch and surveyed the scene spread out before him.

The sun was shining into the grotto, diffusing new life and vigor through his overworked body and mind. Birds were singing outside. The flash of a little cascade near the mouth of the grotto could be seen pouring down in ribbons of foam. Away across the valley, over the top of a somber pinon forest, he could see the dark mountains piled up against the eastern sky like a mighty cloudbank.

To the young exile everything seemed so bright, so pleasant, so joyous, that his mind reverted to the night's adventures as to a horrible nightmare. But his wound, his feeble strength and the many evidences of his fair rescuer's kindness around him, all were ample proof of what he had passed through. And yet he looked back to certain incidents in the night's adventures with pleasure—such as he had never before enjoyed. It was those incidents in which he was brought face to face with the fair Zella, the good angel whose transcendent beauty and gentle soul had found their way to his heart—into that sacred chamber of love.

During the day, Slyly put in an appearance with a supply of provisions, and a basket of luscious early peaches, that still grew in the neglected orchards around those ancient ruins and in many of the fertile valleys of New Mexico.

"And here's sumthin' else, Massa Shear-a-ding, dat de young missus send you," said the precocious young African, drawing a time-worn book from the bosom of his calico shirt. "She said it war the bestest she had to kill time wid, and I guess it is, for I knocked a couple ob hours coming up de mountain wid it, lookin' at de picters. Dar's gobs of dem, massa, in de book. Jings!" and the boy gave his knee a sudden slap that started Sheridan, "but wouldn't I like to be Miss Zella's prisoner, and git lots ob good fixings to eat, and have nothing to do but look at picters? Jings!"

"My brave little fellow," said Asa, taking the book, "you don't think what you're saying. I may be killed at any moment. My enemies might follow you here and find me, and then I reckon you'd not want to be in my place."

"Tel' he! hi! hi!" laughed the boy, shoving his hands into his breeches pockets and leaning back to give full flow to his exuberance of spirits, while his whole face seemed suddenly transformed into a double row of white pearls; "dat's a good un' on Slyly, the Weasel, as dey call me. Why, Massa Shear-a-ding, dar ar'n't a man, Injun or wolf, dat can foller de Weasel. I can climb a tree quicker'n a wild-cat, and I can run like sixty and jump—oh, golly! you jis' ort to see me jump, massa. And den it'd make you run clean over to hear me sing; 'Dar was an ole nigger and his name was Uncle Ned,' or else dat odder song 'bout de 'Swanee Riber."

"Who taught you those songs, Slyly?"

"De young missus. Ain't she a bully gal?"

Sheridan smiled and replied:

"Some day I may have you render those songs in your happiest vein, Slyly."

As he spoke he opened the book and glancing at the title-page read aloud:

"The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe."

"Golly, don't know dat song, massa," laughed Slyly, the Weasel.

Sheridan smiled, but did not correct the youth. He turned through the book rapidly, glancing abstractedly at each illustration.

"Tell your mistress," he at length said, "that I am a thousand times obliged to her for these kindnesses she has bestowed upon me."

"Guess I will tell her, massa; but she told me to ax you how your wound was."

"Getting along as well as could be expected."

"Crackey! dat's fine, ain't it?" exclaimed the Weasel, frisking about as though he was delighted with the news; "when I tells de young missus dat, I'll bet it'll set de blushes a-skippin' over her face."

Slyly remained but a few minutes longer, and when he went away Asa sat down and ate of the delicious fruit sent him by Zella. When he had thus satisfied himself, he again took up the book and began turning through it, looking carelessly at each illustration. While thus engaged, he came suddenly across a sheet of note-paper, upon which had been written a letter bearing no date, but which had evidently been written the day before. The paper had never been folded, and a glance at the single name "Aaron," to whom it was addressed, and the name of the writer, satisfied Asa that it was only awaiting an opportunity to be dispatched to its destination.

Sheridan could not resist the temptation to read it. It ran:

"MY DEAR AARON,"

"I have long delayed writing to inquire after your worldly happiness. For these many years it has afforded me infinite pleasure and satisfaction to know you are living in constant sorrow over a lost child. You know I told you, Aaron, that I would have revenge when you won Estelle's love from me; and then deprived me of all my lands by taking advantage of a slight flaw in the title. You should have known better than to have crossed my path—aroused my Spanish blood. But I presume you know it now. I beg you will take good care of the child I left you, for I always hated the brat. But then she will be a thorn in your side to keep you constantly reminded of your lost child and my vengeance. Your daughter I still have. She is now grown to womanhood, and has large, soft, blue eyes, silken, brown hair and a sweet, angelic face. She is the very image of her mother. I see Estelle Le Grand every day in her face and form. She is well educated—several years in a convent made her all that is lovely. And, my dear Aaron, I am going to break the facts to her soon, and then—well, you can guess the rest. If I couldn't have the mother to wed, I will have the daughter!"

"Yours, revengefully, LEOPOLD HAMALLADO."

"The demon! the gloating fiend!" burst from the lips of the young miner, when he had concluded the revengeful epistle. "The description of the girl is that of Zella. Can it be possible that she is the stolen child—the beautiful woman soon to be made the wife of one she has known only as a father? God forbid! It cannot be possible. There must be some other girl at the ruins doomed to the fate threatened in this letter. Zella was certainly ignorant of the cruel missive being in the book. I will keep it till she comes. I will show it to her, and find out the truth—the secrets connected with her life, and the ruins of Quivira. But there is not a doubt in my mind but those 'Phantom Aztecs' are robbers—that very party of emigrants that passed through Santa Fe two or three years ago, and whom the people called 'Silent Tongues.' Oh, the wickedness of this world!"

Slyly came daily to the mountain grotto, with food and delicacies—such as the country afforded—sent by Zella.

Sheridan whiled away the time the best he could, though the hours seemed to drag by on leaden feet. His wound healed rapidly, and he grew as strong as ever. He longed to plunge out once more into the free air, but an invisible power held him a prisoner in the grotto. It was love.

Nearly a week went by ere Zella came to the grotto—it seemed a year to Asa. It was in broad daylight when she came, and her presence was hailed with infinite joy by her captive.

"It seems an age, Zella," he said, with a frank earnestness in his tone, "since I last saw you. I have read Robinson Crusoe through twice, and to kill time have begun reading it backward with the book upside down."

"Then you must know the story by heart," the maiden said, with a pleasant smile. "I must admit that literature at the ruins is scarce—in fact, limited to that single volume."

"Well, Zella, I began to think you were never coming back."

"And I began to think so, too," the maiden replied.

"Ever since your escape the men have been on the constant look-out for you, but to-day they went away toward the south, and I took advantage of their absence to venture out."

"Can you tell me anything of my dear old friend, Basil Walraymond, and of Nathan Wolfe, Zella?"

"The old man was sentenced to the 'tiger-pit,' you remember," replied Zella. "Well, he was put into a pen, as I call it, and a wild panther, which the men had caught in a trap, turned in upon him—"

"My God, Zella! what sort of inhuman monsters are

your friends?—But, pardon me—go on, Zella; was Wally raymond killed?"

"No; but he had a terrible struggle with the beast. His arm was crushed and broken by the panther's jaws, but he escaped and has not been recaptured yet. Your other friend is still in custody. Slyly and I have been trying to find where he is incarcerated, but so far have failed."

Sheridan groaned in spirit, and relapsed into a painful silence. But at length he said:

"Poor old man! he was one of the noblest-hearted men I ever met. I revered him, Zella."

"Yes, he was a noble-looking old man, and my heart bled with pity for him when I saw him standing in the 'tiger-pit,' waiting for the ferocious brute to be turned loose upon him. His tall form, his snowy beard, and stern, thoughtful face, made him an object of veneration to me. I knew, however, as he stood waiting, that he had no idea of what was to come. I knew that he possessed no weapons, and this would render his destruction certain. My wits were put to work—I wanted to save that man. I slipped around and threw a knife into the pit. It saved his life. With the weapon he afterward killed the panther; but oh, Mr. Sheridan! how my heart was wrung with pity and sadness, when I saw the old man all covered with blood; and saw his poor broken arm dangling helplessly at his side, and his white, bearded face looking up at his tormentors, so sad, so pitiful, in the glare of the torches! I wanted to rush into that horrible pit and help him—save him, but I knew I could do nothing. But God was with the innocent and just. He came to the old man's assistance. When another beast was turned loose into the pit, the old man placed his shoulder against the stone wall that barricaded the arched gateway opening into the pit. It toppled and fell, and with a shout he leaped through the opening and escaped."

"Zella, is Leopold Hamallado your father?" asked Asa, as if suddenly startled from a dream.

Zella's face became flushed, and in a little asperity of tone, she said:

"You have been questioning Slyly?"

"I have not, Zella, upon my word, and honor. There is what led to the question. I found that paper in the book you sent me, and supposing it was also intended for me, I read it."

She took the cruel letter and read it, then burst into a flood of tears.

"Oh, heavens!" she moaned, with all the bitterness of despair, "you will despise me now!"

"And why should I, Zella?" he asked, in a tone intended to pacify her sudden sorrow; "if the contents of this letter are true, you can't help it."

"It is true—oh, heavens, it is too true!" she cried, wringing her hands in grief. "The man whom I have always considered my father told me but a day or two ago that I was not his child—that he had stolen me from my father, who had married the woman he—Leopold Hamallado—loved, and thereby incurred his hatred. But this is not all he told me, but I will not repeat it. The letter tells it all, and but for one thing, Mr. Sheridan, I would have fled last night from the ruins to the Navajo agency."

"And what was that one thing, Zella?"

"The promise I made you—to come back and tell you of your friends and of the 'Phantom Aztecs.'"

"Heaven bless you, girl! I would have died here waiting for you," Sheridan said, crossing the grotto and seating himself by her side. "Zella, I can not keep back the emotions of my heart longer—not if you despise me for my boldness. But to be plain, Zella, I love you!—I loved you from the moment I first saw your face at the window of the 'judgment hall.' Zella, it would be all I could wish for on earth to know that my love is reciprocated."

"Asa," she replied—it was the first time she had addressed him thus—"perhaps if you were away from here, and were to calmly think over the little you know of me, you would change your mind and love."

"Never, Zella," he replied, half desponding, half hopeful; "I am not a boy; I know my heart. Your situation, dear girl, makes my love all the stronger."

"But I have been reared as the daughter of a Spaniard, and that Spaniard is the leader of as notorious a set of outlaws as ever existed."

"I care not for that, either. As I told you before—as this letter tells me—you could not help your situation."

"But what do you know of me—of my character?" she asked.

"Purity and innocence are written upon your brow, upon your heart, and upon your soul. Zella, my own heart's instinct tells me this."

"God knows," she said, sadly, "I have lived a spotless life despite the society I have lived in. For ten years I lived with a Spanish lady at Albuquerque who was a mother to me in every respect. She sent me to a Catholic school, where I obtained a liberal education. As she had no children of her own, she wanted to adopt me, but my father objected, and finally dragged me off away up here, where, for some two or three years, he has been the leader of a gang of robbers—nearly all Spanish-Mexicans—who for cruelty to captives have no equal. They have traps set all through the mountains for wild animals; and whenever a bear or panther is caught, they secure it and shut it up until they can capture an innocent miner or hunter, when the two are thrown together in that horrible 'tiger-pit.' But one thing can be said to the credit of these bad men: they have never, by word or act, offered me the least insult, or uttered an immodest word in my presence. On the contrary, all seemed to vie with each other in their endeavors to make me happy and comfortable in those dismal old ruins. My supposed father told me that I was a little child when he stole me away from my father. He said my mother was dead, but he refused to tell me where my father lived, and what his name is. But to come briefly to the point, I have been living these years with a band of lawless men, and could you, Asa, conscientiously wed such a woman?"

"This detracts nothing from my love for you, Zella. The sweetest flowers oft bloom amid the thorniest thistles. I know whereof I speak. My love is no boyish infatuation. For five days have I been studying this matter over, and my only fears were that you would not return to me here. I longed to lay bare my heart's love. I have now done so, and with this confession of love, Zella, I will repeat the question: will you be my wife?—mine to love always—mine to cherish and protect from this cold, cruel world?"

The maiden's eyes drooped shyly. A deep flush suffused her face; her lips quivered with the joyous emotions of her young heart, and in a low, tremulous tone, said:

"Asa, my heart is yours."

Asa's heart gave a great bound of joy. He took her little brown hand in his, and drawing her closer to his wildly throbbing breast, imprinted upon her warm, ripe, red lips the seal of their betrothal.

A deep silence succeeded, and joy reigned supreme within that mountain grotto. Never did two hearts beat more joyous in reciprocal love. For several moments they sat motionless and silent as if listening to the responsive yet silent communion going on between their hearts. The past, the present and the future with all their sorrows and dangers, were forgotten in that moment of sweet, rapturous bliss.

But this holy silence was suddenly broken—broken by the sound of footsteps ascending the rocky acclivity. The next moment a *sombrero* appeared within sight above the stony ledge in front of the grotto, and beneath the hat appeared the dark, sinister eyes and wicked face of Leopold Hamallado, whom Asa at once recognized as the judge of the "Phantom Azteca."

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE VALLEY OF THE RIO DEL LOS PINOS.

In the valley of the Rio del los Pinos, not far from the San Juan, human voices could have been heard calling to each other from the depth of the deep, dark pinon forest. They were children's voices, and with them were, now and then mingled the deeper tones of men, the sturdy ringing blows of axes, the crash of falling timber and the barking of dogs.

Drawing nearer these sounds, one would have discovered that they issued from an encampment that was teeming with busy life. White men and black; white women and black, were there, all actively engaged in some duty or other; while three or four children played "hide-and-seek" in the wood back of the camp.

The men were at work in a little glade on the foundation of four or five log-cabins, which were, of themselves, evidence of permanent settlement. And that these settlers had traveled far to reach this secluded spot, was also evident from their covered wagons and jaded animals. The most conspicuous of all, however, and that most likely to arrest

the attention of a stranger, was a small, brass howitzer mounted upon a little eminence commanding the valley for some distance around.

Near by the workmen stood a little old man, dressed in the garb of a borderman. He was leaning upon his rifle and watching the men with a bland, quizzical expression on his thin, bearded face. At his side crouched a dog, and behind him stood a drowsy-looking horse with a bridle and blanket upon it.

The former was Dakota Dan, the animal at his side, his dog, Humility; the one behind him, his mare, Patience.

And, as the reader has already inferred, this little band of settlers was the emigrant party we left, in a preceding chapter, at the little village of Conejos. Three weeks previous they had left the last named point, and under the guidance of Dakota Dan had reached the valley of the del los Pinos—the shrine of their pilgrimage—in safety.

They had left Conejos on the morning after the *baile*, when Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent, had made his identity known, striking terror into the hearts of the people, and putting a sudden termination to the night's amusement.

The self-announcement of the handsome young outlaw had gone like a dart to the breast of Octavia St. Kenelm, and she was carried back to camp in a dead swoon. This proved, beyond a doubt, the great love she entertained for the youth, and while her brother felt himself under many obligations to Red Rob, for the assistance he had rendered them in the hour of need and imminent peril, he also felt relieved, rejoiced, when they got away from the vicinity of Conejos. He was afraid the young outlaw would make a formal demand for Octavia's hand, and in case of refusal, carry her away by sheer force. The brother would much rather see her go down to her grave than wed to such a character. This was the St. Kenelm pride of spirit. And when they at last found themselves in the valley of the del los Pinos all felt relieved so far as Red Rob was concerned—felt satisfied that the mountains separated them from the young free-booter.

But, another fear kept them in a constant state of alarm. On the morning they left Conejos, a man overtook them a short way out from the village, and gave St. Kenelm a folded paper, then wheeled his horse and galloped away.

The major opened it and saw, written upon it, in a miserable, scrawling hand, these words:

"Mistur Saint Kenelm, sur, you and that there ole kuss, Dakoty Dan, needn't think 'cos you'r gorin' to git er way before I am able to git out, that you will escape my vengeance. I'll foller you to Californy or hell, but what I'll have satisfakshun. And mind ye, I'll go backed by ther boys, too, and jump ye when yer not expektin' the King of the Road.
"MISSOURI MOLL."

It was the threat of a bully and a coward, else they would have entertained little fears. They knew that he would not seek satisfaction openly, but would creep upon them in the dark like a coyote or lurking savage. However, Dakota Dan had been retained in the service of the party as a scout, and his presence gave them some assurance that Missouri Moll would not approach the camp unseen.

The weather had been exceedingly fine, and so far all had gone on well. Building had progressed rapidly. The logs for six cabins were nearly all cut and hewn, and drawn in, ready to be notched and lain up. Two buildings were awaiting their rafters, and in a few days more would be prepared for occupation. Some of the men were chopping in the timber, some hauling in, and others building. Thus the work went steadily on in the new settlement which had been named "The Hidden Home."

The days wore on, and one evening the little band were assembled around a bright, glowing fire in the open air, some engaged in conversation, some reading and some musing over the past.

Octavia and Maggie were there, their pretty young faces looking bright as ever; although the former could not entirely conceal the disappointment her young heart had sustained in its relations with that handsome young road-agent, Red Rob.

Major St. Kenelm and old Mr. Gilbrest were discussing the prospects of the future in connection with their new homes.

"There is not a doubt in my mind," said the latter, "but that this valley, for sheep-raising and fruit culture, is without a parallel. I believe we can make these two branches of industry pay us well, even if we never strike a lick toward mining."

"It appears that the ancients, who once dwelt in this valley, made fruit culture a specialty; and from this source,

I am informed, the Navajo Indians still derive the largest portion of their revenue. It is true, wool-growing and their looms are not neglected. Besides attending to our flocks and orchards, I would think that, when the busy season is over, we could prospect some for treasure in the mountains surrounding us."

"Pervidin'," put in Dakota Dan, philosophically, "the noble red-men—the Utes or 'Rapahoes—don't come down and eat yer fruit, kill yer flocks, and discomboborate yer ha'r. Durn an Ingin; you can't enny more tell when he's goin' to drap down among a feller than ye can swaller yer self. But then the Triangler Extarminator will keep a-bobbin' and see what can be done for a while to'rds keepin' the valley purged of red-skins, or of ghosts, anyhow," and the ranger cast a lugubrious look toward old Aunt Shady, who sat with her ears open, listening intently to every word.

"Oh, Lord sakes alive!" she exclaimed, when ghosts were mentioned, "if dar am ghosteses in dis here country, I'll jist pack up my duds and hoof it cl'ar back to ole Kaintucky shore whar I war bo'n."

"Durn Kentucky!" retorted old Dan, for he delighted in tormenting the old negress; "it's nothin' but an abolition nigger-nest."

"See here, man! how you talks!" the old woman exclaimed, in injured pride; "you hain't got no respect for Abe Lincoln, de proclamation, nor de Lord, you hain't."

At this juncture, Humility, who was lying by his master's side, thrust his nose upward and sniffed the air as though he had suddenly detected the presence of something in the atmosphere.

"What is it, pup?" questioned Dan, throwing his rifle across his knees.

The dog rose upon all fours, wagged his tail, pricked up his ears, and appeared now to be listening intently.

"Sumthin's wrong, boys, sure as water runs down hill—ah! there! I've heard of it—smoke of Jerusalem!"

The old borderman was excited. He pointed directly before him, and all eyes instantly followed in the direction indicated, and to their horror beheld the face of a man covered with a long, grizzled beard, staring at them with wild, unearthly eyes. But the most horrible of all was the discovery that the head and face of the man rested, not upon the neck and shoulders of a human, but upon those of an animal—an animal with a human head—an apparition that filled each soul with a strange horror.

From side to side the face of the monster turned, as if noting every object and studying each face around the fire. Then it turned, and bounding across the range of light, disappeared in the gloom beyond, while Humility, with a yelp, sped away in swift pursuit.

A deep silence fell upon the encampment.

The pinons sighed mournfully overhead, and the deep bay of the dog sounded faint in the distance.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW MISSOURI MOLL KEPT HIS WORD.

"It's a God's fact, friends; I've heard of it afore," said Dakota Dan, although he betrayed but little emotion. "It's called Centaur, and said to be the descendant of a race of people that used to inhabit this country, hundreds of years ago. An ole miner told me it aiers appeared round camp-fires o' nights, attracted by the light. And he said, whenever you see'd one of them critters, sumthin' bad war sure to follow."

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you, Dan?" asked St. Kenelm, desirous of testing the old ranger's superstitious tendencies.

"Wal, no, major, though some things do look kinder quare at times. One as can read books never believe sich things. Take me on the trail, in the woods, or on the river, and I've a good eddycation. And then I used to know every letter in the alfabet from A to izzard, and could read a right smart sprinkle; but then one will furgit sich things. Howsumever, I can talk two langwidges aside my own."

"Indeed!" said St. Kenelm, surprised by this announcement of his linguistic lore; "what two?—French and Spanish?"

"No, major; more intelligent langwidge—hose and dog langwidge."

A smile passed over every face at this reply, notwithstanding the serious impression left upon all by the apparition.

Humility soon returned from the woods, and the uneasiness he now betrayed by bounding away into the gloom, then back to his master's side, convinced the ranger that something was wrong out in the woods. So he at once made known his intention of going out to reconnoiter the surrounding forest.

He left the camp, and in less than ten minutes returned from the same direction, having made the entire circuit of the place. His face and movements both betrayed some excitement.

"Put out the fire," he said, endeavoring to appear calm, "for as true as that's a heaven above us, Missouri Moll, with a party of friends and a horde of Indians, are near! Keep cool 'bout it, or they may smell a 'mice.'"

An exclamation of surprise burst from every lip, and terror blanched each face. The fearful news fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the little band, and for a moment all seemed stupefied by the shock it gave them.

But the calm, cool voice of the old ranger, admonishing them of their danger, soon set all in motion.

To extinguish the fire, secure the women and children in places of safety, and place every man in a defensive position, occupied but a few brief moments.

Three covered wagons were arranged side by side near the center of the camp, and the beds of the women placed inside of these. This was done as a measure of greater safety. If an enemy charged through camp, the defenseless would not be so exposed to crushing hoofs or murderous weapons as if they were upon the ground.

Octavia St. Kelelm and Maggie Boswell occupied the wagon on the right, facing south, the Gilbrest women and children the middle one, and old Aunt Shady and another negro woman the third.

Two guards were posted, one north, the other east of the camp. The men stood with rifles in hand, waiting for the worst to come.

Dakota Dan and his faithful dog reconnoitered in the woods.

The horses and mules in the corral manifested some uneasiness. The pinons swayed and rustled ominously in the breeze. The coyotes gibbered incessantly away off among the foothills.

The men conversed in low tones, the women in tremulous whispers.

Octavia and Maggie did not disrobe when they retired to their "apartment" in the wagon. Fear had banished all sleep from their eyes. They went to work and fastened the lower edge of the wagon cover securely down to the box all around, as though this frail barrier of canvas would secure their retreat against intruders. Then, locked in each other's arms, they entered into conversation. They talked in low tones of their dangerous situation, of Red Rob, and in fact of everything suggested to their young minds.

Octavia spoke in praiseworthy terms of the outlaw youth, who had made captive her heart. In spite of all that her friends had said—in spite of all she had seen, she could not help loving Red Rob. Her own reason taught her that he was unworthy of her love; still she could not rend asunder the magic chain that bound her heart to him.

"Brother Albert rejoices that we are away from the vicinity of Red Rob's retreat," Octavia said to Maggie, "and all on my account. But, Maggie, I cannot help loving him, outlaw though he be."

"Your infatuation will wear off, by-and-by, Octavia," replied the sedate, matter-of-fact Maggie.

"No, never, Maggie!" responded Octavia, firmly. "All naturally suppose that I love Red Rob, but none knew it positively but you and brother. I have made confidants of no others."

"Red Rob is unworthy of your thoughts, Octavia, to say nothing of your love," affirmed Maggie.

"We all felt thankful, from the bottom of our hearts, that he saved the train from the Indians; and then you and I, and all the rest, felt grateful to him for saving brother's life, the night he visited the saloon in Conejos."

"I admit that, Octavia," said Maggie, "but in neither instance was his real character known."

"That matters not, dear Maggie. We accepted the gift, and so must not rebuke the donor, or else we will be wicked and selfish creatures. If an infidel saves your life, the act would be no greater if it had been done by a Christian."

"I admit this, Octavia; but we were deceived in his char-

acter. We thought at first, all of us, that we were bestowing our thanks and admiration upon a good, brave and noble boy, but instead of that, he turns out to be the notorious road-agent, Red Rob. He had some designs, it is thought, in saving the train—perhaps to destroy it himself."

"Oh, Maggie, do not talk so of him. It hurts me, and—"

Octavia's words were here brought to an abrupt conclusion by a faint noise outside, followed by a slight vibratory jarring of the wagon.

Both listened with bated breath and wildly-palpating hearts.

"What do you think it was?" asked Maggie, when they found the movement was not repeated.

"I presume it was one of the men passing, and struck his foot against the wagon-tongue," replied Octavia.

"I will look out and see what is going on, if the darkness will admit," said Maggie.

Carefully she raised the lower edge of the tilt in front, and gazed out.

The wagon was standing in the little clearing, yet the shadows of the woods rose up like a grim black wall around them, infolding all in a mantle of gloom. Maggie could see nothing, but she thought she heard stealthy footsteps retreating rapidly from near the wagon. Before she could make this fact known to her companion, both felt a kind of a thrumming jar like a heavy rope being drawn suddenly taut. The next instant the wagon started forward with such a violent lurch that the maidens were thrown from their seats. But quickly recovering their former positions, they were startled by the discovery that the wagon was in motion.

"What does it mean, Maggie?" gasped the terrified Octavia.

"The men must be moving the wagon by hand," was the response.

They tore aside the canvas in front and gazed out. Not the sign of a man or horse was about the wagon. And yet the vehicle was in rapid motion—the wheels rattling and thundering over the uneven ground as though drawn by a span of fiery animals.

"Oh, heavens, what does it mean?" cried Octavia, in terror.

"Look, Octavia!" exclaimed Maggie, pointing on ahead; "do you see that rope?"

Octavia saw it the moment she spoke. Objects were gradually unfolding themselves from the darkness as the eyes became more accustomed to gloom, and the maidens could now see the dim outlines of a rope, one end of which was attached to the wagon-tongue, the other end being lost in the impenetrable gloom of the woods, but a rod or two away.

An enemy had crept from the woods and attached the rope to the wagon.

Octavia uttered a cry of alarm.

The report of rifles at the further side of the camp told that their friends were engaged there with an enemy.

The wagon rolled into the woods and came to a violent halt by striking against a tree. The maidens were thrown prostrate by the collision. As they hurriedly rose to their feet again, a gruff, coarse voice shouted:

"Quick, men, seize them!"

Then the canvas was stripped from the bows, and two men sprung up into the wagon.

The maidens uttered a scream—it told where they were. The next moment they felt strong arms encircle their waists—felt themselves lifted from their feet and handed from the wagon to other men on horseback, ready to receive them. Then, despite their cries and entreaties, they were borne swiftly away.

The conflict on the opposite side of the camp had been very brief—in fact, the enemy had only made a feint to draw the attention of the men from the foe operating on the other side of the camp. But as soon as the settlers saw what was up—heard the noise of the wagon and the screams of the maidens, they turned and hurried to the girls' assistance. But they were too late. When they reached the wagons, the enemy were gone with the maidens; but from out the darkness, a deep, hoarse voice, furious with demoniac passion and hellish triumph, hurled back the words:

"Vengeance is mine at last!"

Major St. Kelelm recognized the voice. It well-nigh froze the blood in his veins.

It was the voice of the desperado, Missouri Moll!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE NIGHT FLIGHT.

DAKOTA DAN was busily engaged north of the camp when Octavia and Maggie were captured. A band of Arapahoes, acting in concert with the outlaws, attacked the camp in order to draw attention from the south side, and thereby enable Missouri Moll to carry out his designs. But as soon as the outlaw's shout of vengeance announced his success, the Indians withdrew. Then the defenders hurried to the other side of the camp to find the maidens gone.

"Oh, heavens!" burst from Albert St. Kenelm's lips, and he fairly staggered under the terrible blow.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Dakota Dan. "I knowed some-thin' war goin' wrong," he continued, with a dubious shake of the head, "when I heard them rovin' wild-cats of Arapahoes utter their war-yoop, and then not make a general attack. I knowed it war one of their t'arnal slippery tricks to draw our attention aside, while other of their friends done some deviltry at another point."

"You were right, Dan," replied St. Kenelm, with a heavy heart. "The outlaws had tied a number of lariats together, when one of their men crawled in and fastened one end of it to the wagon-tongue, leaving the other end out in the woods where the main party would not be exposed. By this means, the wagon was drawn suddenly into the impenetrable shadows. The rope is here yet."

"Too bad, too bad!" sighed the ranger, regretfully. "I did not think Missouri Moll could outwit the Triangle. But I'll make it all up yet, friends—I will, true as water runs down hill. Jist keep a stiddy nerve, a stiff lip and quiet tongue. I've never found a case yit, but what we—that's me, Patience, my mare, and Humility, my dog—could work out. We figure by the rule of three, and we have solved some knotty problems. When man, hoof, and howler are all once set a-goin', you could jist as well stop an avalanche. With Humility to take the lead with his olfactory snoot, me next to direct movements, and drap an occasional bullet here and there, and old Patience to bring up the rear and slap an occasional red-skin into purgatory—with all these things set to work like machinery, then look out for a pestilence. Why, bless your soul, friends, when I war up in Dakota, the Triangle got to be sich a dead certainty that jist to shout "Dakota Dan" at a red-skin he'd drap down instanter, and arrange his hair for the skulp-knife. As for Missouri Moll and his men—why, they won't be a huckleberry to us for to circumvent if they don't fall in with the Ingins. If two men will go with me, we'll take the trail at once, and won't come back without them gals."

Major St. Kenelm and Richard Boswell, brothers of the captured maidens, at once announced their readiness to accompany him; and leaving the camp in charge of Mr. Gilbrest, his boys and the negroes, the three set out in pursuit of Missouri Moll.

They all journeyed on foot, although the ranger took his mare along to be used in case of emergency.

They had no difficulty in finding the trail of the outlaws, nor in following it. Humility took the lead with his nose to the ground, and all the men had to do was to follow the dog. To St. Kenelm and Boswell, this would have been a difficult task, owing to the darkness, which at times entirely concealed the animal from view; but to old Dan it was no trouble whatever. The dog and master had become so accustomed to each other's part in the great drama of border life they were continually enacting, that they seemed controlled by the same intuitive volition.

Thus for miles they journeyed on, when a low, significant whine of the dog told that the enemy was near.

The trio came to a halt—they listened. They heard a slight, confused crashing through the undergrowth and trample of hooved feet some distance in advance.

"Plant yerselves right here, friends," said the old borderman, "and then I'll know whar to find ye when I come back. Don't move if the earth sinks 'neath yer feet, for, if we git seprated, we might git into trouble. I'll run out and reconnoiter the sitewation—be back in a minute or more."

And, so saying, the ranger stole softly away. St. Kenelm and Boswell listened. They could now hear the murmur of many voices, as if engaged in consultation; and presently they heard the tread of horses' feet going away, and all sounds become hushed.

The enemy had resumed his journey.

Dakota Dan soon made his reappearance.

"Well, what discovery, Dan?" asked St. Kenelm, with eager impatience.

"The 'tarnal devils have divided the work—that is, the Arapahoes and outlaws met out thar, and the 'Rappas claimed one of the gals for their share of the spoils."

"And did they get one of them?" asked Boswell.

"They did, by Jerusalem! The outlaws didn't want to give her up, but they had to or fight. But I don't know which one the 'Rappas got. It war too dark to tell—the 'Raps went one way and the whites the t'other."

This news added new weight to the brothers' grief, but to the major the blow fell with double force. Both his sister and sweetheart were in peril, but, while they were captives together, he knew the presence of one would be some comfort to the other. But now they were separated, and he instinctively felt that the one in the power of the Indians was in the most imminent peril, and between his love for his sister and that of his sweetheart, it was a hard matter for him to decide which party to follow first—the one which had Octavia, or the one which had Maggie in custody.

Fortunately, however, he had no decision to make, for Dakota Dan knew not which of the maidens had been given up to the Indians. But which ever was in the power of the outlaws, Dakota Dan considered in the most peril. For, notwithstanding his hatred for the Indians, he considered them more honorable and humane toward female captives than their white associates. He argued this to his two companions, and succeeded in convincing them that an Indian was a savage by nature, but with many redeeming traits of character, while a renegade was a creature whose moral depravity was utter and complete.

The old ranger's views were accepted as a decision to the question as to which party they should follow. Moreover, Missouri Moll was acting under a spirit of revenge, and there was no telling what his devilish heart would lead him into, to gratify that spirit.

The trail of the outlaws continued due southward, crossed the San Juan river, and headed for the mountains wherein their safety would be assured.

Missouri Moll led the way with an ease and rapidity that were evidence of a familiar knowledge of the country and its tortuous windings. He was followed by ten men, all well mounted and armed, and all of the most desperate character.

The outlaw had kept Maggie Boswell a captive in his possession, under the impression that she was St. Kenelm's sister. He carried her in front of him, the poor girl lying an almost lifeless burden in his strong arms.

As they rode along, the ruffians conversed together over their victory, all appearing wonderfully elated at their "master's" success.

"Durn ther souls of them!" the desperado growled, as they moved along, "I'll l'arn 'em how to tamper with me, Missouri Moll, King of the Road. This 'ere gal 'll not begin to pay for that 'tarnal gap that Saint Kenelm cut across my face, forever ruinin' my beauty. No, boys; we'll cut for the hills and ambush. The friends of this gal 'll be apt to foller us, of course, when we'll shoot every devil of 'em. But, lookey here, boys, I want about five of you to drap behind now, and act as a rear guard. If persuers should come onto us, all to onc't, it would hussel me like thunder to git out of the way with this gal. She's a dead lump, almost. Thar's no danger, yit it's best to keep on the safe side. The emigrants can't track us in the night, so we'll be able to git hid afore morning. But then I want a rear guard. It 'll be more military-like. They'll think I'm a reg'lar West Pint ginerel afore they git through with me."

Five men at once signified their willingness to comply with their master's orders, and at once took their positions in the rear of the cavalcade.

After crossing the river, the outlaws entered the dry, gravelly bed of a stream, and continued to follow its well-defined course toward the mountains. They did not move with all the speed nor silence possible, for in their excessive elations of triumph, they had forgotten all about the dog of Dakota Dan, by means of which swift pursuit could be conducted. And while the outlaw was congratulating himself on the success that had attended his night's work, and the distance he was putting between himself and enemies, Dakota Dan and his two companions were gaining upon them every minute.

Ignorant of this fact, however, Missouri Moll rode leisurely on up the creek. As he advanced, the banks on either side

gradually rose higher and higher, and ere long the outlaws found themselves traversing the dark, dismal depths of a yawning canon several hundred feet deep. But Missouri Moll knew the tortuous windings of the rift, and to where it led, and so pushed on in triumph.

Soon he and his four companions debouched from the dismal gorge into an open court or park, that was walled in on all sides by the mountain, that rose a thousand feet above them.

The moon was now in the zenith, throwing its mellow light into the little valley. For a hundred feet or more the walls rose almost perpendicular, then began to slope gradually backward in irregular tiers, one above the other, like the terraced seats of an amphitheater. The shadows concealed many of the irregularities of the awful heights, giving the place that symmetry of form that lingers about the ruined handiwork of man.

Here, within this valley, Missouri Moll believed he was safe; but no sooner had he expressed an assurance to that effect than the report of firearms came rolling up the canon, with the sullen roar of artillery, awaking a thousand mountain echoes—gathering volume as it advanced.

"The guard has been attacked!" exclaimed Missouri Moll, with sudden terror. "That old Dakota Dan and them emigrants have overtaken them in the pass!"

They listened with bated breath.

The firing ceased all at once—in fact there was but one discharge. Then, when the rebounding echoes of the reports had died away, a deadly hush succeeded.

The moon shining down into the little valley fell upon the stolid faces of five motionless horsemen.

Suddenly the clatter of hoofs is heard coming swiftly up the stony pass.

"Brace for a fight, boys!" exclaimed Missouri Moll; "it may be enemies what's got in ahead of the rear guard."

Five hands sought a revolver each—five locks clicked as one, and the men were ready for fight.

Then forth from the shadows of the pass came three riderless horses, mad with affright. These were followed by two others with riders—all that remained of the five detailed to guard the rear approach.

"They're comin'!" cried one of the fugitives, "close behind! They've killed three of the boys!"

"Dismount, men!" roared Missouri Moll, "and defend the approach to the valley with your lives!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WILD RIDER.

DAKOTA DAN and his companions had come up with the rear guard of the outlaws when about half-way through the pass; and with one well-directed broadside tumbled three of the villains from their horses—the other two seeking safety in flight. Before firing upon them, however, the old ranger had assured himself of the fact that no captive was in their possession.

This attack would place the others on the defensive, and, being fully acquainted with the pass himself, Dan knew it would require some precaution to avert an ambushade. He trusted, however, to the superior instinct of Humility, and, passing over the three dead outlaws, they picked their way onward through the eternal gloom of the pass.

As they approached the valley without finding the enemy, the old ranger began to speculate over the possible movements of the outlaws. He soon arrived at a decision, which proved to be the correct one as to the position and intention of the foe, and at once ordered a halt, saying:

"We can't go another step till daylight, boys; tho' this may seem a cruel fact to you. The devils are in the valley concealed, coverin' the mouth of this pass with their rifles. We've got to wait for daylight, then mebby we can execute a flank movement onto them. If we could only see now, Humility here, and Patience thar, would do their part, and do it well; but then we can't, and so we'll have to wait."

This decision was a painful one to Boswell and St. Kenelm, but they accepted it without a murmur; though the long hours of night were passed in dire impatience.

The first evidence they received of the approach of day was the sight of a slender thread of light hundreds of feet above their heads.

Dakota Dan was in no hurry to be on the move. He waited until broad daylight had unfolded every object in the little valley from the shadows of night. As the sun gilded the distant mountain heights, he crept forward, followed by his two companions. As they neared the mouth of the pass the light struggling in showed that all was clear before them. At length they debouched into the little valley, and to their surprise found it deserted by all except the outlaws' horses. This, however, convinced them that the villains were not far away—had secreted themselves in some niche or cave in the carped and fluted walls that hemmed in the little vale.

While the three stood carefully searching the valley before them for their enemies, a voice that seemed to come from the clouds shouted forth:

"Raise yer eyes, Dakota Dan, and you'll see what yer lookin' for!"

The trio lifted their eyes, and upon a sharp projecting ledge or table-rock, two hundred feet above them, beheld Missouri Moll standing, with Maggie Boswell at his side.

A cry of surprise and indignation burst from the lips of the men, and Humility growled fiercely:

Plain and distinct the outlaw and his frail captive stood out against the rosy morn, he a demon, she an angel.

The shriek of an eagle perched on a cliff high up in the clouds, and the soft chirp of a bluebird in the valley were fit accompaniments to the two spirits on the rock.

Three rifles were raised simultaneously to shoot the desperado down, but he interposed the body of the trembling Maggie between him and danger, and then shouted:

"Shoot if you'd complete what I've begun."

"Don't fire, for God's sake!" moaned St. Kenelm, lowering his own rifle.

Dan and Boswell obeyed the lover's request.

Then the old ranger scanned the rock for some place where he might be able to ascend the rock, but the wall was perpendicular. He could do nothing, and he dare not venture further into the valley for fear his body would become the focus for half a dozen concealed rifles.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the demon on the cliff. "I dare you to shoot!"

"It'll be too easy a death for you, monster," replied Dan his bearded face assuming a look of intense pain. "I want that pup to chaw yer throat till yer life leaks out little by jerks."

"You can talk now," responded the desperado, "but I defy you and the men you have back in that pass."

"That's good," said Dan, in a low tone. "He thinks thar's more of us back in the canon, but let him think so, and directly I'll swing old Mortality into posish and send a bullet plumb-center through his brain afore he's time to creep behind the gal."

"Be careful, Dan, for her sake," continued St. Kenelm, whose heart could no longer conceal its emotions of love for her so near, and yet so far away beyond their assistance.

Maggie was standing on the edge of the dizzy height, her head bowed, her arms hanging at length and her hands clasped together. Her pale face looked serene in its sadness, and to St. Kenelm, never so sweet and angelic as now.

"Thar's no way to flank the 'tarnal varmint," said Dan, after a moment's reflection, "else I'd send Humility, my dorg thar, up to throttle the big, cowardly sneak."

"Where do you suppose his men are?" asked Boswell.

"Three of them's back in the pass," replied Dan, facetiously, "and I'll venture to assert the others are guardin' the way by which he got up thar, or else they are hid behind him under them rocks."

"Why don't you shoot?" suddenly yelled out the desperado, from above; "I'm ready."

"You be, be you? You're durned brave now, ar'n't ye? Skulk behind a gal, can't ye? You'll make another boy drink likker, won't ye?" returned Dan, with all the sarcasm he could throw into the words.

"Ho, ho!" retorted the outlaw, "vengeance is sweet. Here I can defy you all, and the moment a man of you fires a shot, I will give you what you seek—I will hurl this girl down to you, as true as there is a God!"

The brother and lover groaned in spirit.

"You're a brave critter, ar'n't you? What did that gal do to you?" responded Dan.

"Do you see that?" asked the desperado, laying his forefinger on a livid scar that extended across his cheek.

"Yes; pity the knife that made it didn't find your heart," the old ranger shouted back.

"Either your knife, or that of the man who stands at your

side, made that scar in the Conejos saloon," continued Missouri Moll. "I swore then I'd have revenge, even if you were backed by a legion of devils, and I will too. The two girls' captivity is but a foretaste of what's to follow. Besides, you've not the road agents to aid and abet you as they did at Conejos. Your friend, Red Rob, will not be so handy next time. He'll not dance with yer gals soon again, for they are my gals now."

"I can't see what all that's got to do with that scar on yer face, and that bigger one on yer soul. Away up yander, Missouri Moll," said the ranger, lifting his hand warningly toward heaven, "is a God in whose eyes you are a smaller speck of insignificance than in mine. He'll settle accounts with you, man, and send you below where Satan is already punchin' up the fire in anticipation of your comin'. The horn of Gabriele will soon proclaim the judgment morn in your ears."

The old ranger's words seemed strangely prophetic, for scarcely had they died upon the clear, vibrant air, ere the shrill clangor of a horn came thrilling down from amid the gray mist of morning clouds, gathering volume as it advanced—bounding and rebounding from mountain side to side, and rushing away through the shadowy gorges, awaking a thousand slumbering echoes.

Our friends started with amazement; the outlaw's face was aghast with terror. All lifted their eyes upward.

A cry burst from every lip, now pale and trembling.

Down from amid the clouds, along the mountain side where it seemed impossible for the foot of man to have picked its way with safety, came a horseman at a wild, breakneck speed. His head was bare, his hair flying in the wind. Neither saddle nor bridle hampered the chamois-like movement of the gallant steed, from whose nostrils the hot breath poured in almost fiery currents, and whose smoking flanks were covered with frothy foam. The ring of the iron-shod hoofs could be distinctly heard upon the stony mountain side, and with every footstroke fire seemed to burst in jets from the rocks.

"My God!" exclaimed St. Kenelm, "who is it?—what madman thus riding into eternity?"

No one answered, for no one knew.

Still on comes the mad, reckless rider, straight down the dangerous mountain side. He will soon reach the table rock upon which the outlaw and maiden stand—and then, no power on earth can save him from plunging over the cliff into the valley, hundreds of feet below. The movements of the fabled steed Pegasus could not have been more swift, his footsteps more unerring among the clouds, than that of the animal now flying down the mountain side; nor his rider less daring than the gallant young Bellerophon as he dashed on to the conquest of the dread Chimera.

There was a kind of a horrible fascination in the awful scene, and the three men in the valley, and the outlaw on the cliff forgot all else and watched the wild horseman galloping down into the awful abyss.

As he drew nearer and nearer the ledge, the flushed face of the rider began to assume a look of familiarity.

"Red Rob!" exclaimed St. Kenelm.

"Red Rob!" repeated Boswell.

"Red Rob, the Boy Road-Agent!" added Dakota Dan, with a nervous start.

CHAPTER XXV.

RED ROB IN BONDS.

WHEN they recognized the face of Red Rob rushing on into a fearful death, Dakota Dan and his two companions turned aside to shut out the horrible sight so soon to come. Then their hearts almost ceased to beat—their very souls sickened with horror in anticipation of hearing that awful crushing sound.

Aside from the ring of the horse's hoofs a pistol-shot rung out from the cliff above; an awful cry of human agony followed.

Our friends lifted their eyes upward, and a cry of astonishment burst from their lips.

They saw Missouri Moll stagger backward and fall. They saw Red Rob check the speed of his animal and come to a sudden halt at Maggie's side on the very brink of destruction. They saw the young outlaw lift the terrified girl to a seat before him, and then go bounding away up the mountain side, his Pegasean steed bounding from terrace to terrace

with all the swiftness and accuracy of footstep of the mountain goat.

The three men witnessed the whole with a sort of a vague, horrible suspense.

Dakota Dan raised his rifle to fire, but St. Kenelm prevented his deadly purpose.

"Do not fire on him, Dan," the young man said; "robber though he be, he is too brave—too noble to die—but look yonder! There are Missouri Moll's friends!"

True enough, the sudden turn of affairs had brought the outlaw's friends from their concealment, and with all their speed scaled the mountain side in pursuit of the reckless boy outlaw.

The form of Missouri Moll could be seen hanging half-over the edge of the cliff, his life-blood trickling from a wound in the heart.

Prophetic indeed had been Dakota Dan's words. In less than a minute from the time of their utterance, the spirit of the desperado had gone to the judgment.

"Now what, Dan?" asked St. Kenelm.

"Ay! what indeed?" replied the ranger, in a tone of deep perplexity, as he watched Red Rob disappear from view amid clouds that still hung like a pall around the crest of the mountains. "I never was so helpless in all my life. Neither man, hoof nor howler can put in a lick, kick or tooth. But the question now arises: is the gal out of the fryin'-pan into the fire? What'll that wild young dare-devil do with her?"

"Yes, these are the questions, indeed," said young Boswell. "I felt in hopes we were out of the reach of that outlaw, albeit we are under many obligations to him."

"And I'll bet we'll be under another one," said Dan. "He's already been a pestilence to that Missouri Moll, and—"

"You think, then, he will take sister Maggie to her friends, do you?" interrupted Boswell.

"He's capable of other good acts, I dare say. That boy is an outlaw and robber for nothing but the wild fun and adventure in it, I dare say. We hear of his doin' more good acts than bad ones, and that's sumthin' you can't say of two outen every three of mankind, be they saints or sinners; and yit the latter go unpunished, but are simply called 'doubtful,' 'scaly,' or—to put it a little stronger—'rascals.' But Red Rob! Oh, Lord! he's a monster—a boy outlaw! a murderer, and all sich, beca'se he gallops down once and awhile and relieves some ole 'don' of his ill-gotten gains, and fast hosses, and raises a general rompus all over the ranches—scars the peons to death, and then gallops back to the mountains to hear the thunder roar, and lat' in his sleeve. I don't approve of sich things, boys; but then that Red Robert is a prince of a robber, and may turn out to sumthin' good afore he dies. That's no tellin'."

"I hope, Dan, that your words will prove true in this case," declared St. Kenelm, as his mind reverted to Octavia's love for the young outlaw. "But, boys, time is precious. Neither of the girls is rescued."

"True," responded Dan, as if suddenly started from a doze; "let us at once hasten back to the Hidden Home settlement. If that young scamp takes Maggie home, she'll be thar afore us."

Without further delay they turned their faces down the pass and moved with dispatch.

They soon passed the three dead outlaws and emerged into the open valley.

Crossing the San Juan, they hurried rapidly forward and reached home just as a band of masked horsemen, with Red Rob at their head, came in sight of the camp.

On a pony at the young outlaw's side rode Maggie Boswell.

Dakota Dan's words had again proven prophetic; Red Rob had restored the maiden to her friends unharmed.

On the outskirts of the settlement the main body halted. Only Red Rob rode into camp with Maggie. A look of bitter disappointment was upon his handsome face, for Maggie had told him of Octavia's abduction.

Friends rushed forward to greet Maggie and rejoice over her safe return, while Dakota Dan and Dick Boswell made their way to the side of the young outlaw to extend their many heartfelt thanks to him for what he had done. The youth greeted them warmly, and spoke facetiously of the night at Conejos. At the same time, however, he seemed uneasy and restless. But, excusing himself for declining to accept the hospitality of the settlers, on the grounds of great haste, he turned to leave.

A line of fifty men, dressed in the uniform of United States soldiers, and with muskets at a trail, filed out of the dark pinon woods.

"Ah!" exclaimed the commandant, "we have the young outlaw at last. Down, Red Rob, and surrender."

Fifty muskets gleamed brightly in the morning sun as they rose quickly to the shoulders of the soldiery—fifty deadly muzzles converged to a single focus—the breast of the Boy Road-agent.

"Soldiers, I am your prisoner," exclaimed the fearless youth, in a calm, unmoved tone.

He dismounted and gave himself up.

His men turned to flee—he saw them, and snatching up the horn that hung at his side, blew a shrill blast upon it.

The men paused in their flight, turned about and rode boldly down into camp.

The soldiers suspected some treachery—that an attempt to release their leader would be made.

"Boys, surrender. We are all prisoners."

It was Red Rob who spoke.

The soldiers were relieved of their fears, but astonished.

The outlaws dismounted and gave up their weapons, and became prisoners.

The soldiers went into camp then and there, and were soon after joined by a party of civilians who had accompanied the expedition into the San Juan in search of the robbers.

Among the number was one of the chief justices of the territory, and this eccentric public functionary at once convened a court, as he claimed he had the right to do, and Red Rob was put upon trial for his life!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TRIANGLE AT WORK.

In the mean time, where was Octavia St. Kenelm?

Guarded with all that care and caution peculiar to the savage, she was being conducted toward the Arapaho village. Her captors numbered some thirty braves. All were afoot, and they journeyed but a short distance after they had got possession of the maiden when they went into camp for the night. Their force was sufficiently strong to preclude all fears of danger from the friends of the maiden, were they disposed to follow them.

Octavia was treated with far more kindness than Maggie, although the former was the captive of savage barbarians.

After their halt for the night, she was placed in a little bower, extemporized for her comfort, and carpeted with skins and furs. Her shoulders had been wrapped in a blanket to protect her from the chill night air. During the long hours of night, she was closely guarded, and the next morning a clumsy framework, like a litter, was constructed of poles and blankets, upon which the captive was seated and borne onward by four warriors. In fact, she was treated with unusual kindness. She was not permitted to walk even where walking would have been preferable, and notwithstanding the difficulty and delay experienced in getting through the woods and mountain passes with the litter.

When night again closed in, it found the party several miles from their village; however, it was the intention to make that stronghold before halting, and so they pushed slowly onward.

Shortly after dark the glimmer of a camp-fire some distance ahead, diverted the attention of the party from their great desire and efforts to reach home. For there was that about the fire, and the rather secluded location of the camp—although it lay directly in the path of the red-men—which seemed to indicate that it was the camp of a white man.

A halt was ordered and a scout sent forward to reconnoiter. He soon returned with the intelligence that a single white man was encamped in the woods by the fire.

The chief selected five warriors from the party and sent them forward to capture the unknown intruder.

With the silence of phantoms, the warriors crept stealthily forward through the gloom. They soon came in sight of the camp, but to their surprise and disappointment the man was gone. But that his absence was only temporary, was evident from one fact; his horse remained hitched near the fire, and seemed inobvious to all earthly things save the sweet enjoyment of a sound slumber.

The savages remained concealed nearly an hour, waiting the return of the man; but to their regret he came not. A hasty consultation was held, which drew out the belief that the enemy had got wind of their approach and feeling far more safe in trusting to his own legs than those of his antiquated-looking old horse, he had left it behind.

With all that caution with which a wolf feels its way toward a carcass not visited before, the savages crept from their concealment and approached the camp fire.

The old horse opened its eyes and kicked out viciously at the open air, as though it had been awakened from a bad dream.

The savages laughed at this sudden demonstration of the slumbering beast.

The red skins forgot all else in their desire for savage sport, and one of them crept softly up and picked the old horse with the keen point of his knife. But quicker than a flash of lightning, the animal whirled and planted its heels in the Indian's stomach, sending his body in the air, and his spirit to the happy hunting-grounds.

This put a sudden termination to the fun, and a goodly distance between them and the deadly heels of the treacherous old horse. A messenger was dispatched for the main column which soon came up.

Octavia could scarcely repress a cry of surprise when her eyes fell upon the old horse hitched within the full glow of the camp-fire.

It was old Patience, the mare of Dakota Dan, the ranger. But where was the ranger, himself? Was he near—or had the mare been stolen from the corral at the Hidden Home?

Fierce and deadly were the scowls that clouded the savages' brows, as they turned their eyes from the dead comrade upon whose naked breast was the livid imprint of two hoof-marks, to the old mare drowsing unconcernedly by the camp-fire.

Not a savage would now venture within reach of her, but long poles and switches were cut, with which the resolute red-men began to "whale" the dormant tiger-temper out of the old anatomy, with the view of substituting her for the litter when once subdued.

Octavia saw the cruel intention of her captors, and, springing to her feet, she ran up to the old mare and began caressing her in a manner that seemed perfectly congenial to her—the animal's—feminine sensibilities. The animal seemed to know that the girl was not an enemy to her master, and her docility toward the maiden was but the evidence of remarkable animal instinct.

Patience had become quite an object of admiration and curiosity in the camp of the settlers. All had bestowed some kindness upon her—had petted and fed her and indulged her in her peculiar, wonderful sagacity, or "female gumpshin" as old Dan would have it. Octavia had ridden her, fed her and caressed her so often that the mare finally regarded her with as much respect and the same obedience as her master.

The maiden's heart had grown strong with hope since their arrival at the camp fire. The presence of the old mare was evidence to her that Dan was not far away, and perhaps others of her friends were with him. But why the ranger had left his mare and gone off, she could not form the slightest conception. She inwardly hoped and prayed that nothing had befallen him.

The savages seemed to regard the animal's friendliness toward the maiden with some curiosity and doubt; but as none of them could speak English, they could elicit no information by questioning. So far, the conversation between captive and captors had been carried on by signs and gestures. At length, however, a warrior ventured to approach the animal. She made no offer of violence, and so the worst trouble was overcome and the mare was at once unhitched.

The chief of the party, a large fleshy fellow, arranged a cushion of several thicknesses of blankets on the animal's back, and upon this, arranged his own two hundred pounds of adipose tissue, determined to make the rest of the journey in ease and comfort. Octavia was also given a seat upon the croup behind the savage dignitary and then the procession moved triumphantly forward, the dead warrior taking the maiden's place on the litter.

Patience yielded to savage authority with humble resignation, and ambled slowly away through the gloomy woods, with the sullen savage rocking from side to side, and the fair captive weeping, more despondent than ever.

Octavia was satisfied that they were nearing the Indian village, or else her captors would have gone into camp at

nightfall; and her fears now began to assume proportions entirely beyond the possibility of hope. Once in the Indian stronghold, she knew all chances of escape would be cut off.

While brooding over her sad and bitter fate, a low, prolonged, whistling sound suddenly stole through the night. Patience pricked up her ears in an instant, deliberately took the bit between her teeth, and like a deer shot away through the woods, with her double burden.

The savage, rocking and bouncing more violently than ever, exerted his utmost strength to check the animal's flight, while Octavia clung to the red-skin with that desperation born of sudden terror. But the chief's efforts were as futile as a child's. Patience plunged on through the woods, her course apparently directed by that peculiar whistle still pulsing through the air.

But the chief was too deeply absorbed in his efforts to keep his equilibrium and gain control of the mare, to hear that whistle; else he might have been less reluctant to vacate his cushioned seat. But to give up a victory already within his grasp, would have been to call down upon his distinguished head a shower of derision from his followers, and so to preserve the dignity of his position, he held on to the reins and Patience held on to the bit.

Suddenly the mare dashed into an open, moonlit glade and came to a dead halt.

"Down, red skin; it's my turn to ride," said a voice, accompanied with the click of a gun-lock and the growl of a dog.

Dakota Dan, with a leveled rifle, confronted the chief!

A cry of joy burst from Octavia's lips and she leaped to the ground.

And a cry of rage burst from the savage's lips. Seeing his danger, the chief slid from Patience's back on the opposite side and attempted to flee. But Humility was ready for his part in the drama, and springing forward, seized the Arapaho as he fled, midway between the nape of the neck and the heels, causing him to howl and dance on tiptoe in a gingerly manner.

Dan turned to Octavia, but a yell of the approaching warriors would not admit of delay or explanations then between the rescuer and the rescued; and assisting the maiden to a seat on Patience's back again, the ranger beat a hasty retreat, calling Humility away from the unlucky chief, who was spinning around like a top, in vain endeavors to get behind himself and choke off the dog.

The escape was not made a moment too soon. They were barely under cover of the woods ere the warriors burst into the glade on the opposite side.

For some time Dan led the way rapidly through the woods, speaking never a word. But as soon as he had assured himself that they were out of immediate danger, he stopped short and said:

"Safe, aren't you, little one?"

"I feel so, at least," replied the overjoyed maiden, "under your protection, Dan."

"Bless my soul, if that don't make me feel good!" the ranger exclaimed, as if to himself. "But, smoke of Jerusalem!" he continued, "didn't ole Patience, my mare here, play her part well? She war a pestilence to that red-skin that essayed to prod her with his knife. I war deposited whar I could see all. And I war mortal afeard she wouldn't give up at all, and if it hadn't been for you she wouldn't. I wanted things to turn out just as they did. I've had my eye on 'em all afternoon, and see'd 'em totin' you along on that litter, and says I to Humility, 'Thay'd like a boss to put her on,' and Humility barked, and then I know'd he thought so, too, and so I circled 'round and got in ahead of you, and fixed up the game onto 'em. Patience is a splendid kicker, ain't she? Lord! it'd 'a' done your soul good to 'a' see'd her flip that red-skin over Jordan to the happy huntin'-ground! And I'll bet she crept away right smartly with you and that red-skin when she heard my whistle. Humph! greased lightnin's nowhar with her, Octavy. And then come to the finishin'-touches, Humility, thar, displayed his activity and put in a tooth—hel hel! I'll bet that red-skin don't sit down squar' again for a solid year."

"My escape seems miraculous, since I have come to think the whole matter over, Dan," Octavia said.

"It's nothin' much after one gets used to it, little one. The great Triangle has done some wonderful things since it began to operate. We've washed the soil of every territory in the West with our blood, and propose to keep right on till the great Master of life bids us cease our labors."

"Dan, do you know what has become of Maggie Bos-

well?" Octavia asked, as her mind recurred to her beloved young friend.

"Yes, my little gal, I do that. She's safe as a dollar in a Dutchman's pocket, at Hidden Home."

"Oh, thank Heaven!" murmured the maiden, joyfully.

"And who do you think saved her?" questioned the old ranger.

"I daresay, my friend and rescuer, Dakota Dan."

"Wrong," replied Dan, as if flattered by her guess; "a chap done it who, for pure, undefiled dare-devilishness and harem-skarem, rip and thunder recklessness, aren't this side of the grave, and his name is Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent."

"Red Rob?" repeated Octavia, as if she doubted the evidence of her hearing.

"Yes, Red Rob; but the boy's a prisoner now. The soljers come a-robber-huntin' up from Fort Wingate, and kaptered him. And I expect it'll go hard with him, too, for soljers has got little mercy fur sich fellers. He war to be tried, and if found guilty, as in course he will be, he war to be shot."

A groan burst from Octavia's lips, and a cloud far more gloomy than the night overshadowed her heart.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE IMPRISONED MAID.

We left Asa Sheridan and his betrothed, the lovely Zella, face to face with Leopold Hamallado in the mountain grotto.

The look that mounted the face of the dark-visaged Spaniard was one of consuming rage and fiendish triumph mingled. His lips curled with all the scorn and indignation of his wicked soul, and his dark eyes snapped and glowed as if with living fire.

Asa Sheridan saw the uncompromising fury of the man's heart, and he arose to his feet determined to defend himself and Zella to the last; but before he had shown his intention by any hostile movement, a dozen of Hamallado's men appeared at the entrance to the grotto.

Resistance now, on the part of Sheridan, would be sheer madness.

"Hal by the Holy Virgin!" exclaimed Hamallado, with savage fury and triumph, "we have found the villain and his gentle friend!"

"Oh, father!" cried Zella, imploringly, springing forward and throwing herself at the villain's feet, "spare him, father, I implore you!"

The wretch seized her rudely and thrust her aside with a horrible oath.

"I will spare him, the young dog!" hissed the villain.

"I will spare him only for the tiger-pit; and you, girl, will suffer for this under the bastinado. A cozy nest to woo your mate in, my gentle child. But I will see to your happiness hereafter. And you, dog of a miner and scapegrace—you will not escape my vengeance again. Here, men! seize and bind the young villain—cut his throat if he offers the least resistance."

The young man saw how useless—even dangerous, it was to offer resistance; so he had to quietly submit to the power of the outlaws, and was securely bound.

Hamallado searched the grotto. He found the book in which was that letter of fiendish triumph and gloating revenge. This added new fuel to his consuming wrath, and Zella's poor heart almost ceased to beat through fear that he would murder herself or lover in cold blood to appease that terrible fire in his breast.

Asa was conducted down the mountain side, across a little chaparral, beyond which lay acres of those ancient ruins that are strewn through the San Juan valley. He was taken to and inside an old quadrangular building—the only one amid the ruins that held out any inducement as a habitation. And even this from the exterior looked like a huge pile of stone and sun-dried brick, overgrown with rank weeds and parasitical vines.

The captive was led along a dismal passage, down a flight of moldy, slippery stairs, and into the very dungeon which Slyly, the Weasel, had liberated him a week previous. Here he was bound hand and foot and chained to the cold, slimy floor. A guard was then placed at the door, and all possibilities of escape cut off.

Sad and serious thoughts now crowded upon the young man's brain. He had brought all this suffering upon himself. Why had he not made his escape from the surrounding dangers when he was free to go? Why had he remained inactive in the mountain grotto, when night after night offered its friendly shelter under which to depart in safety? Ah! why, indeed? His own heart answered: he was a captive even in the mountain grotto. Love held him there enchained, and what danger would a true man not brave for the woman that he loves?

One thought brought others in its train, until finally the night of his first captivity, with all its horrors, was recalled to memory. And then the face of that noble old man, the mysterious Basil Walraymond, stood before his mental vision. He recalled all that Zella had told him of the "tiger-pit," of the crushed and broken arm of the old man, and his escape into the forest. But, where was he now? Had he perished in the woods for want of some friendly aid? Was he a wandering sufferer among the mountain hills, dying slowly by inches?

While these thoughts were revolving through his mind, Zella, his betrothed, was weeping, sad and lonely, in all the agony of a broken heart, in a room on the floor above, where she had been imprisoned by the wretch whom she had always loved as a father. Leopold Hamallado was seated before her, mocking her in her helplessness.

"You have brought this all upon yourself, girl," he said, with a savage fierceness in his tone, "and now you'll have to suffer the extreme penalty. You managed that miner's escape, you hid him away among the hills, fed and wooed him there, at the same time denying all knowledge of his whereabouts. Then to cap the climax, you carried him the book and letter—"

"In which you exposed your fiendish character!" cried Zella, in a fierce, reproachful tone.

"I have proven myself an enemy that seeks a terrible revenge, girl. I loved your mother and warned your father that if he won her away from me he would rue it. And so he has. He shall know yet that I have his child, and that I propose to make her my wife. You are the very picture of your mother. She was an educated woman, and that you might be as near like her in every respect as was possible, I sent you to school and into the best society at Albuquerque. Your father is still living, and I will tell you something about him before long that will astonish you. But in one week from to-day we leave Quivira ruins for Salt Lake City, and between now and then—or as soon as the men all get home—your handsome, vagabond lover will be consigned to death in the tiger-pit."

Zella stirred not, nor even evinced the slightest emotion at the man's fiendish words and threats. But nothing escaped her ears. Every word was indelibly stamped on her memory.

Presently the villain arose and left the room, locking the door behind him.

Then the resolute courage that she had been struggling to keep up so long, gave way, and the maiden burst into a flood of tears. The deepest anguish wrung her poor young heart.

She was kept a close prisoner, her wants being attended by the old negress that was both cook and housekeeper in the outlaws' retreat.

From the negress she learned that active preparations for departure from the ruins were going on. She said the captain was getting uneasy—that he had expressed a fear of that old man who had escaped from the tiger-pit.

"Where is Slyly, Huldah?" Zella asked the negress one morning, when she brought in her breakfast.

"He's skulkin' round de ruins here like a kill-ship fiste-dog. Guess he's up to some deviltry. De ole massa jist mo'n licked thunder outen him yisterday, and he look mos' awful sneakin', does dat Slyly boy."

This news, bad as it was in one respect, gave Zella some hope. She felt satisfied that her faithful servant-boy would leave nothing undone to liberate her.

On the fourth night of her incarceration she suddenly became aware that something or some one was in the room. She was so terrified that she could not move nor utter a word. It was so dark in the room that she could not see her hand before her. An awful horror stilled her heart; and at last, when it seemed as though the awful suspense could be borne no longer, a voice whispered:

"Missus Zellee!" the last syllable slipped out into a shrill, wheezy squeak.

It was Slyly, the Weasel.

The sudden reaction from terror to joy left Zella so weak that she could scarcely stand.

"Is it you, Slyly?" she gasped, as if in doubt.

"You jist bet, Missus Zella. Guess if I wasn't so black like de darkness, you could see me."

"Where did you get in, Slyly?"

"Jings! I jis' wiggle-waggled in; but sorry to say you can't git out dar, missus. But I come in to see you, and see if I could do ennything for you."

"What's going on outside, Slyly?"

"Oh, Lord, missus! ebb'rything dat's bad. De ole massa givin' me de awfulestest whalin' dat I ever had. Whew-eel he jis' made de blood fly! I'd kill him, dead, missus," and the boy's voice fell to a calm, deliberate tone, "if you'd tell me to."

"Oh, no, Slyly! never! You would be a murderer then—the wickedest of wicked people. But, what is your master and the men doing?"

"Fixing up de tiger-pit to put de young man, Massa Sher-a-ding, into. De men cotch two mos' gol-whoppin' big bears in de bear-traps and dey am gwine to make dem eat de prisoner up, 'fore de Lord dey is, Missus Zella."

"Slyly, you have been a good, kind boy to me," said Zella, laying her hands upon the youth's head. "If I ever can, I will make you a present of a pony or a gun some day; or whatever else you would prefer."

"Golly, missus! guess I'll take a big, long plug ob to-backer."

Zella could not help smiling at the boy's aspiration, but having promised him the coveted article, she said:

"Slyly, can't you turn the bears out and let them get away?"

"Guess not, missus; 'fraid dey'll cotch dis nigger. But I knows sumthin' better'n dat, I does. I know how mean ole massa kill de wolves dat howl in de valley. He put pising in de meat and give it to dem. I knows whar de pising is, and I guess I give some to de b'ars."

"Do so, Slyly, and you will never regret it," replied Zella, highly pleased with the youth's idea. "But be very careful that you are not caught in the act, or it will cost you your life."

"Think I will be dog-goshed careful, missus."

The boy soon left the room, his exit being made with that wonderful silence with which he had entered.

The next morning Zella looked for the place where he had effected his entry, but could see no sign of an opening in the walls, the ceiling or the floor.

The coming night was the time set for the execution, or rather the torture, of Asa Sheridan; and, as the day wore away, a vague and horrible suspense took possession of Zella's mind, which was increased by a dull, foreboding sound without, resembling the moan of a coming storm.

Shortly after darkness set in, Slyly stood at her side in her prison room.

"Did you succeed in killing the bears, Slyly?" the maiden asked, trembling through fear of a negative answer.

"Lord, yes, missus; de b'ars am as dead as Noah!" the youth replied.

Zella's brain grew dizzy with the sudden rush of blood from her heart that had seemed to be growing cold with fear and horror; but she soon recovered her composure and asked:

"Does your master know it?"

"Guess he does, missus; and, Lord gosh! it'd do yoah soul good to hear him chaw out de awfulestest cuss words. Gracious Peter! but he's jist a-foamin' mad! I tell you it's fun to hear him cuss and rave. He's a mighty easy swearin' man—words flow as easy like as de San Ju-ann."

"Does he mistrust who poisoned them?"

"No, guess not, for I heard him say he'd extarminate the one that done it if he knowed who it war."

"Do you know what they're going to do with the captive?"

"No; but I thought I'd come and tell you what I'd done so's you wouldn't take on."

"Well, Slyly, I want you to go back and watch them. If you can liberate Mr. Sheridan do so, and then let me hear from you."

"All right, missus. I'll go right now, 'ca'se I's in a big hurry—want to hear ole massa boom and swear 'bout de b'ars. I tell ye, it's gay."

Zella made no reply to the eccentric youth's remark, and the next moment she was alone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AUNT SHADY'S SECRET.

DAKOTA DAN and Octavia St. Kenelm reached Hidden Home in due time and in safety.

To Octavia the camp presented quite a different appearance to what it did when she was so ruthlessly taken away. It looked more like that of military than of civilians, for the soldiers with Red Rob and his band were still there. The former numbered some forty odd, the latter just fifteen.

The horses of both the soldiers and outlaws were corraled in the valley, not far away.

Red Rob was allowed the freedom of certain well-defined limits over which two soldiers kept strict guard. His men were confined in one of the settlers' unfinished buildings, and seemed to take their situation with cool indifference, passing the time in smoking, playing cards and spinning yarns.

Red Rob also seemed to take his captivity as coolly as though he were a military prisoner being held for immediate exchange. He conversed freely with the settlers and soldiers, and expressed a regret to Judge Thompson for his having postponed his trail until the day following.

As soon as Dakota Dan returned with Octavia, the young outlaw chief was as greatly rejoiced as any one in the camp; and ere her friends were aware of the fact, the maiden and the youth were together.

"I am sorry, young man," Octavia said to him, as they again met, "to find you in this situation. For all you are considered an outlaw, you have been a valuable friend to us all."

"Octavia," the youth replied, tenderly, "do not let my captivity give you one moment's trouble. I feel confident of acquittal."

"Upon what grounds?" she asked, eagerly.

"Of the good deeds in excess of the bad ones that I have been the author of."

"I hope it will prove to be even as you say."

"Then you do care for me, Octavia?" the youth asked, with a tremor in his voice.

Octavia started, and her face flushed crimson.

"I beg you will not be offended with me, Octavia," continued Rob; "my own heart tells me that I am loved, for since I first met you on the road to Conejos, I have loved you, and there is nothing I would not have done for you and your love. It was this love that brought me into the San Juan valley, and although I am now a prisoner, this interview with you will more than repay me for the risks I run. But if I am mistaken, Octavia, in regard to your feelings, I pray you will tell me. To know that you love me, is all I ask. I will prove myself worthy of your love."

"Red Rob, outlaw though you be, I love you," replied Octavia, her eyes dropping, and her lips quivering with the emotions of her young heart.

"God bless you, my darling girl," responded the youth, joyfully; "to know this is to live. Had my love not been reciprocated by you, I should not have cared how my trial terminated. As it is, I only ask that you wait until I have been tried. The judge is waiting for the arrival of a party of soldiers, settlers, and Sante Fe excursionists, who have been following my trail for two weeks, and who were to have met Captain Rushton's command at the confluence of the Rio del los Pinos with the San Juan. As soon as they arrive, I will be tried."

"My prayers will be for your acquittal, Rob—"

"Robert Conrad," said the youth. "Some time, if I live, I will tell you why I am called Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent."

They conversed awhile longer, then separated. No truer hearts ever beat happier with the responsive thrills of love and joy.

Octavia sought Aunt Shady, but she could not be found. The last seen of the old darkey, she was walking leisurely down toward the river. The maiden went in search of her. She found her seated upon the river-bank, smoking a short-stemmed clay pipe. Tears were chasing each other down her sable cheeks. They recalled the time Octavia had found her in a similar mood while encamped near Conejos.

The old woman looked up, as Octavia came up to where she sat, and in a tone half laughing, half crying, exclaimed:

"Law-sakes, honey!"

"Well, what's the matter now, Aunt Shady?" the maiden asked.

"I's jist thinkin' how lonely I'd be now if you'd been killed when dem Ingins had you."

There's lots of folks in the world besides me, Aunt Shady."

"Yes, I know dat, chile, too. But den dar ar'n't but one Octaby; den dey am nuffin' to me what you's been. Ever sence my little Henry Clay's been gone, you've filled dat vacant place in my heart, honey. Poor little Hankie; he war a mos' awful sweet chile."

"Do you think you'd know him, aunty, if you were to meet him?"

"Oh, Lord sakes, yes, chile! a mudder couldn't furgit her childerns. Den my little Henry Clay had a—"

"A birth mark?—a strawberry on his arm?" laughed Octavia.

"No, chile; but he had a finger cut off, and a big scar on his head, and one ob his big toes war crooked; and I'd know him by dese 'firmities."

"I should think so; but look here, aunty, the time for you to tell that secret about my life is up; do you know it?"

"Oh, bress my soul, Octaby! I war in hopes you'd forgit dat secret. It'll cause you trouble, chile, and if I hadn't promised ole Massa St. Kenelm to tell you and Massa Albert, I'd die afore I'd tell it—yes, indeed I would, honey; but if I must, why, I must."

"You must tell it, aunty," said Octavia, seating herself by the old negress' side.

"Well, chile, to come right slap-dab to de p'int, you're not your fadder's chile."

"Not my father's child?" exclaimed Octavia, in astonishment; "what do you mean by that assertion?"

"I mean you're not Massa St. Kenelm's chile—not Massa Albert's sister."

"Is this true, Aunt Shady?" demanded the maiden, in painful surprise.

"Yes, honor bright, honey; you's not Massa Albert's sister."

"Then who am I?"

"Don't know who, chile."

"My God!" cried the maiden, bitterly, "am I an outcast? Was I picked out of the gutter?"

"No, indeedy, you wa'n't. You war a sweet, darling little toddler left at Massa St. Kenelm's house, all fixed up in nicesest clothes I ebber see'd."

"Then brother Albert knows I am not his sister, does he?"

"No, he don't."

"And why not?"

"'Ca'se I nebber told him. He had a little sister Octaby, but she war taken away and you left in her place."

A little cry burst from the maiden's lips.

"Your father—dat's ole Massa St. Kenelm, war nigh 'bout distracted when he found his little baby girl was gone, but he come to me and said: 'Shady, keep dis a secret, dis changin' ob children.' I know who done de hellish deed, and I'll never cease to hunt him till I gits my chile. I will never come back till I finds her—my Octaby.' He told me to call you Octaby—jist like his chile—to treat you kindly, 'caze ye couldn't help it. He said if he didn't git back inside ob twelve years, to tell you and Albert de secret, and now it's told, honey."

"Why didn't brother Albert know it the time the exchange was made?"

"He war away down South gwine to college; and when de wah broke out, he went right from de college into de army, and staid dar four long years; so de two years at college, and de four in de Confederate army, made six years," and the old negress illustrated the fact on her fingers, "and all dat time he nebber see his little sister. So when he come home, he nebber knowed but you war Octaby, you'd growed so. In de meanwhile, de news come to us dat Massa St. Kenelm had been killed by de Lincoln sojers in Arkansaw; and it war so, honey, for de whole thing war in de papers."

Octavia wept bitterly. Old Aunt Shady wept too.

The sound of hooved feet suddenly started them both. They raised their eyes and beheld that fearful apparition that had so startled the settlers a night or two before—that terrible creature that Dakota Dan had called a Centaur—a creature with a human head and face upon the shoulders and body of a large deer. It stood upon the opposite side of the river staring at them with its glassy eyes and white-bearded face—so horrible, so repulsive, that the souls of the women sickened with an indescribable abhorrence, and with a scream of terror they turned and fled toward camp.

An alarm at once spread through the whole camp, and soldiers and settlers at once flew to their arms and formed in line of battle. But all became quiet when the cause of the excitement became known.

"What is this creature you call Centaur?" asked Captain Rushton.

Dakota Dan described the animal, and then, accompanied by the captain and a squad of soldiers, they repaired to the river bank where the women had seen it. But, to their disappointment, they found it had disappeared. Hoofprints, however, were found in the yielding soil along the bank, which was evidence of its having been there.

And so, none the wiser, the party returned to camp.

By this time the sun was nearly down, and a gray mist was gathering in the valley.

A faint noise like the rumble of distant thunder was heard afar-off in the mountains. Dakota Dan shook his head ominously.

"We're goin' to have a storm, boys, I'm afeard. You can hear the old weather-dog a-growlin' over in the mountain now. The rain may not reach us from the clouds, but I'll bet it 'll come a-boomin' down the river from up the mountain. But, let it come, captain; I've determined on one p'int, and that is to foller the track of that animal to its hidin'-place. I'm goin' to know whether it's man or beast, flesh or spirit."

"But night is coming on; how can you see to follow the track?"

"Smoke of Jerusalem, man! don't you know anything 'bout Dakota Dan, the great Triangle of the West? Humility, my dorg thar, can foller a year-ole trail, and I can foller him. Humility leads, I command, and Patience, my mare here, brings up the rear in reg'lar military order. Both of 'em animals are as sagacious critters, capt'in, as ever sunk tooth or boxed American soil. Thar's good blood in them, capt'in, as ever leaped in equine or canine veins. I could trace their pedigree cl'ar back to Noah and the ark, I sw'ar I can. But, capt'in, I'm goin'. Keep lots of guards out to-night, and then post men to watch the guards. Thar's no tellin' what 'll happen in this world."

The ranger took his dog and left the camp.

The night came on dark and gloomy. The wind soughed diamally through the pinons, and rumbled in hollow, sullen tones among the hills. The gathering storm moaned in the distance

CHAPTER XXIX.

TRAILING A CENTAUR.

DAKOTA DAN put Humility on the track of the Centaur and moved rapidly away in pursuit. The creature had followed down the del los Pinos to its junction with the San Juan, when it turned and continued on down the latter stream.

Night had already blended mountain and plain in chaotic gloom. The sky was overcast with black, scudding clouds. The heavens were one quivering sheet of vivid flame, rendered more terrible in its awful grandeur by the constant roll of thunder afar off.

Such storms as that threatened were not of infrequent occurrence in this volcanic latitude, though now and then a fearful wind-storm swept over the mountains and plains of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Dakota Dan had become familiar with the country and its climatic freaks, and knew exactly what to depend upon. On the night in question he prophesied a heavy rain along the eastern range of mountains, but he was satisfied that it would not extend as far westward as the del los Pinos valley; that is, that there would be little rain here, but he had no doubt but the wind and thunder would be terrific. He was satisfied, also, that, if there was a heavy rain to the eastward, the streams and gorges would empty their flood into the San Juan and fill it to overflowing, even endangering the valley with inundation. But, nothing daunted, he pushed on for miles.

Suddenly Humility came to a stop, and manifested signs of having sighted the game they were following.

A prolonged glare of sheet lightning revealed the form of the Centaur moving along, with the lofty, majestic tread of a stately buck, a short way before him, its bearded face turning from side to side and glancing backward over its shoulders, as though it detected the presence of danger.

It was following the river bank where the trees grew sparse,

and now and then when the animal ascended a little rise in the surface of the ground, the hunter could see it outlined against the blazing sky and appearing like some Titanic monster, grim and grotesque.

Several times the ranger was tempted to fire upon it, but, as he could not aim with any certainty of success, he finally concluded not to run the risk of a shot through fear of frightening it away; and so he followed on—on after the horrible creature that at times loomed up in the lightning's glare, then sunk from view in the blinding gloom that followed. Sometimes he was close upon it, then again far behind. The creature moved on all the time with the same proud, stately gait, while its bearded face kept that constant movement from side to side, as though the lightning's glare blinded it.

Suddenly the ranger came to a halt, and exclaimed aloud to his dumb companion:

"Humility, whar the nation are we goin', pup?—crazy? What are we follerin'? and what are we follerin' it fur? Have we journeyed through life all these years—through a thousand dangers, to be led to death by—by what? Durn the thing, what is it? It ar'n't human, nor it ar'n't beast, but it's both. Ah! now I've got it! Heavens, pup, what condemned fools we've been! That's the devil—the veritable old skeezicks hisself! and like hundreds of others, we've been follerin' his Satanic majesty, scarcely knowin' it. Queer you didn't smell brimstone in his track, Humility. Thar's no mistake 'bout it bein' the superintendent of the sulphur-diggin's. He's got a human head, pup; cloven feet, and—well, he's got no horns now—reckon it's sheddin' time for horns; but it's no use whinin'—it's the old imp, and so we'd better make the best of our fool's errand, and turn noses promptly, and go ba— Jerusalem!"

A human cry burst suddenly upon his ears.

It came from down the river, and on the wings of the storm, it seemed like a wail of distress.

Dan listened for a repetition of the cry.

Away off toward the mountains he heard a faint rolling, rushing, roaring sound, as if the sluice-way of heaven had been rent asunder, and rivers of water were pouring down and spreading over the valley in one mighty, resistless tide.

"By Judea, pup, she's comin'!" exclaimed Dan, accustomed to talk aloud to his dumb companions as though they comprehended what he said. "The rain's been awful up mountainward. The gorges have all emptied their water into the river at once and now it's comin' a-howlin'. How it sounds! Heavens, but it's awful! In ten minutes more it will be here and the river 'll be rushin' on bank-full. Yes, pup, and it's beginnin' to rain a leetle sprinkle here, and now let us git to shelter."

They turned from the river and started away toward the bluffs.

"There again!" suddenly burst from Dan's lips.

"Broof!" barked Humility, softly.

Both had heard that cry of distress from down the river again.

"We must see into it, ole dorg," said the ranger, and turning, he glided rapidly down the river.

Those cries of distress grew plainer and plainer before him, the roar of the advancing avalanche of water louder and louder behind. Still he hurried on—he could not turn a deaf ear to suffering humanity.

He suddenly discovered that the sound came from out upon the river. He glanced off in the direction from whence it came, when in the lurid glare of the lightning he saw that which sent a shudder to his soul. In the middle of the river was an island barren of vegetation. It loomed up against the glaring waters plain and distinct. A post was planted in the center of this island, and to the post was bound a man in an upright position.

From this helpless creature's lips issued those cries of distress, for well he must have known that the torrent, whose thunderous tread was plainly audible, would sweep him from existence.

The quivering sheet-lightning that illumined the surrounding with the glare of the midday sun, showed the ranger how securely the helpless man was lashed to the post.

The water that separated the old borderman from the island was quite shallow, and the ranger was about to step down the bank and wade over to the helpless man's assistance, when he discovered the forms of several men standing on the opposite shore with rifles in their hands.

What did it mean? Why were they there? Had they bound that helpless man to the stake on the island?

There were few moments for idle speculations. The torrent was near. The rain was falling fast—the cries of the doomed man sounded above all.

Humility started suddenly up with a low, fierce growl.

Dan heard a slight rustle behind him, and turning, he saw the bushes near him suddenly parted, and a black, terrified face appear in the opening!

CHAPTER XXX

SLYLY AND THE TORRENT.

It was Slyly, the Weasel, that appeared before the ranger. "Zip-ee, stranger!" exclaimed the young darkey; "did I skeer you bad?"

"Who are you, anyhow?—an imp of darkness?" responded Dan, confronting the boy, while Humility kept up his growling.

"I'm black as sin, massa—black as a chunk whittled out ob de night; but if you jis' make dat br'nerly-lookin' dog ob your'n quit his snarlin' and take his teeth in, I'll come out ob here and tell you who I is."

Dan quieted his dog, and the little darkey slid out of the bushes like an eel.

"Now I's Slyly, the Weasel, and live up to de ruins; and, massa, if you can save dat young man out dar what de wicked men are goin' to kill, de young missus 'll never forgit to pray for you."

"Who is that man? and why is he fastened to that post?" asked Dan.

"He's Mister Shear-a-ding, and he's put dar to drown, 'kase he lubs de ole massa's gal. Ole Massa Hamallado is an awful bad man. But Lord, massa, don't you hear de torrent comin'?"

"I'm not deaf, nigger."

"Wal, can't you save de young man for Miss Zella's sake?"

"It's too late now; the torrent's here—oh! Je-rusalem!"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the boy.

With the rush and roar of a hundred trains of cars along their iron road, the torrent swept past them, bearing upon its foamy crest masses of floating timber and debris. It seemed utterly impossible that human life could withstand the awful tread of the seething giant. But no sooner had the head of the torrent passed by, and the water in its wake sought a general level in the bed of the river, than that wail of distress again issued forth upon the night.

Dan glanced over the now full, rushing river, and, to his surprise and horror, beheld the bound and fettered man still at his post. The island, however, was submerged, and the doomed man nearly covered. Only his head and shoulders were above the rushing tide.

The river was nearly bank-full and still rising rapidly. A few minutes more, and the life of Asa Sheridan will have been ended.

The young man's terror and mental torture were far more terrible than they would have been had he been consigned to the tiger pit. It was by a miracle only that he escaped being ground to atoms under the heel of the flood-monster, to be tortured to death by inches as the water crept slowly up his breast and neck. He struggled with all the desperation of a madman to free himself, but the water had drawn his bonds all the tighter, and his efforts were as futile as a child's. His enemies had made sure that he would not escape, and then, to make assurance doubly sure, they stood upon the bank to watch him perish.

To shoot a man down seemed no pleasure to Leopold Hamallado. It was too soon over with. He loved to see an enemy writhe in agony, as we have already seen in the case of Basil Walraymond. When he found that the two bears were dead—had been poisoned—his devilish brain was put to work to conjure up a substitute for the beasts. The storm muttering afar off suggested an idea. He knew by former observations what was sure to follow the storm in the mountains—the flooding of the San Juan. He made known his plans to his men, and with the captive at once repaired to the island to put them into execution. And, so far, all had worked well, and with that fiendish delight which appeared to be the controlling element of their natures, they watched the form of the youth slowly sinking beneath the rising waters.

Slowly, and with all the horror in the touch of a slimy

serpent, the water crept up the young man's neck. He could turn his head from side to side. He could glance along the surface of the lightning-lit waters, and see it rolling around him. He could see the dusky forms of his tormentors standing on the high bank, but no friendly form was to be seen.

The water at length reached his chin. He saw that he had but a minute longer to live. The rushing river was black with floating logs and debris swept down from the mountains; and it was only the post against which he was leaning that saved the young man from being crushed to atoms by these.

The last hope of earthly assistance faded from Asa Sheridan's breast, and he lifted to God in prayer his trembling voice.

Something brushed each cheek. He turned his head and saw that a huge forked log had caught astride of the post to which he was bound. Each prong was about ten feet in length by a foot and a half in diameter; and while Sheridan was contemplating each with that vague hope with which a drowning man grasps at a straw, a voice within a foot of him suddenly spoke:

"Stranger, ye're in a monstrous ticklish place, ain't ye?"

Sheridan bent his head to one side and saw the head of a man close up in the crotch of the huge fork. It was a thin, rough, bearded face, yet one calculated to inspire the suffering man with hope. His heart leaped with joy, and his lips articulated the imploring appeal:

"Help, stranger, or I'll drown!"

"I believe you," replied the man in the crotch of the log, reaching out and cutting young Sheridan's bonds; "now, jist as soon as yer hands are free, throw 'em up and cling to the logs. But keep yer head well behind the prongs, and then them devils can't shoot you. There, now, stranger; how's that?"

"I'm free!—great God, be thanked! I am free once more!" the young man exclaimed, in a low tone. "Who are you, friend? Heaven's instrument of mercy?"

"I'm familiarly known as Dakota Dan; the Triangle red-skin exterminator. That's two more of us back yet—one's Humility, my dog, and the other's Patience, my mare—awful pre-dicament you war in, wa'n't it, youngster?"

"I was dying by inches, Dakota Dan," the young man responded; "but how are we to escape, now the log has lodged against this post?"

"Jist wait, youngster; the water 'll soon raise and boost the bark over the post, then away we'll go, heigh-ho, down the river! Keep a hand on each prong to support yerself, and then we'll run no risks—there!—now!—here we go a-scootin'!"

Leopold Hamallado and his minions saw the great forked log lodge against the post. Its prong next to them concealed the youth's head from their view. But still they kept their watch until the top of the post had disappeared beneath the rising waves; and when the fork floated on, they never dreamed that it bore two human souls with it. Outwitted, defeated villains, they supposed the mad waves had covered their victim, and that the morning sun would rise upon a lifeless, bloated form standing erect upon the island, a tempting feast to those filthy-winged inhabitants of the air—the vultures!

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON TERRA FIRMA.

"This 'ere is what I call boatin' under diffickilty, youngster," said Dakota Dan, as he and Sheridan floated swiftly down the roaring river; "I've sailed on canoes and other large vessels that there way, whar the accommodations war much better'n they are here. Most too much moisture 'bout this for me, stranger."

"I observe that you are inclined to take things coolly, old friend," said Asa.

"Yes, this water, especially. But, youngster, kick out vigorously with your left foot, and we'll try and 'gee' this 'ere craft to'rds the shore, and let's land. I never did like boatin'."

Asa complied with the ranger's request, and a perceptible change in the course of the log was observed. It veered off toward the right shore, and in a few minutes the men had

effected a safe landing and sought the cover of the trees that fringed the river.

"Now then, young man," said Dakota Dan, "I'm in my element, and if you'll jist trip along with me up to whar Humility, my dorg, and ole Mortality, my rifle, are, I'll be much obleeged to you."

"Dakota Dan, I am at your service in anything you may command," Asa said, as they started off up the river. "You have saved my life, and—"

"Certainly," interrupted the ranger, for he knew what was coming, "I've been doin' a great deal for sufferin' humanity for these thirty years, and it's jist as common fur me to save a life as it is to wing a red-skin. But them war really robbers that haltered you up thar, war they?"

"They were outlaws of the vilest character, but what led you to think they were?"

"A little black negro boy, that drapped from the clouds, told me they war. He war a cute little brat I tell ye—called himself the Weasel."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Sheridan. "Has he gone?"

"Gosh, jings, no! Massa Shear-a-ding, here I is!" exclaimed a voice, and Slyly came bounding through the darkness, and seizing Asa by the hand, kissed it with joy. "Oh, Cæsars, Massa Shear-a-ding! You don't know how glad I is dat you's safe. I told dat man it war you and he saved you; and now the young missus 'll git me a whoppin' big plug ob tobacker. Ki-yi! ain't dis chile happy as a pickle?" and the youth executed a leap and a tumble that would have done credit to a young gymnast.

"Where is Zella, Slyly?" Sheridan asked.

"In de ruins locked up," replied the boy; "ole massa's jist been raisin' de partic'ler ole Scratch down dar. He shut de young missus up; cussed ole Huldah, de nigger cook, black; and whaled de very nation outen dis chile. Whew! but de ole sinner jist scotch!"

"What was the matter with the monster?" asked Asa.

"He war mad—jist hornet-mad 'bout de bears."

"What about the bears?"

"Jings! but it'll make yoah hair stiff up when I tell you. You see ole massa war gwine to put you in de tiger-pit and let de bears eat you up smack and smooth. But Miss Zella tell dis chile to p'isen de bears, and, gosh! I done it. And den's when de storm begin to mutter; ole massa jist rave and dance. When he sees dar war a storm comin', away he went wid you to de island—swear he drown you, and away I poked arter him. I couldn't do any thing, but I war awfully tickled when dat gemman come up. I told him who you war, and away he went to save you. Golly, massa, he's a bully ole chap."

Dan chuckled to himself.

"And your mistress is a prisoner?" asked Asa.

"Yes, sah."

"And can you get into her prison?"

"Yes, sah."

"Will you see her to-night, and tell her I am safe?"

"Yes, sah; any thing else?" with a broad grin.

"Tell her to be patient—that I will rescue her as soon as I can get force enough together to capture the outlaws and all."

"Lord sakes, massa! if you takes de young missus away, and kill de robbers, what'll come ob dis poor nigger boy?"

"I will see that you are well cared for, Slyly. You have been a faithful friend to your mistress and to me."

"Ki-yi! dat sounds good, massa; I's your huckleberry."

"Be careful that your master does not catch you in your going to Zella's prison."

"I'll see to dat, massa; but, scissors! wouldn't I like to tell ole massa dat you am safe."

"Why so?"

"Oh, jist to see him snap his teeth and grit his eyes."

Dakota Dan indulged in a fit of hearty laughter over the odd expression of the lively little darkey.

"But I won't tell him, in course, massa," the youth continued.

"Then hasten back to the ruins and see Zella at once."

"All right, massa," and the boy was gone.

Dakota Dan and Sheridan continued on up the river till they came to where Humility was guarding his master's weapons.

"That's Humility, my dorg, stranger," said the ranger, and he went on and gave a detailed history of the animal and his wonderful exploits, winding up by inviting Asa to accompany him to the camp on the del los Pinos.

Sheridan gladly accepted, and the two started off up the river.

The young man's spirits became revived. With the assistance of the soldiers, whom Dan informed him were so near, he hoped to be enabled to effect the rescue of Zella and the capture of the outlaw band.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RED ROB UNDER TRIAL.

OWING to circumstances—that of high waters—over which they had no control, Dakota Dan and Asa Sheridan did not reach the camp until the next day about one o'clock.

They found the trial of Red Rob going on when they arrived, and so great was the excitement, and so deep the interest manifested by all parties, that Sheridan had no opportunity of making known the object that laid nearest to his own heart; but was compelled to await the termination of the proceedings.

During the day a party of soldiers and several Mexican ranchmen, who had suffered losses at the hands of Red Rob, came in from the east, and joined Captain Rushton, who had been expecting them a day or two. This party had come directly from Conejos, from whence they had followed Red Rob's band, word having been previously sent to the nearest military post that the young outlaw and his gang were in the vicinity of Conejos. When it was found, however, that the robbers were headed for across the mountains, a messenger was dispatched to Fort Wingate for assistance, or rather, for the military there to endeavor to head the robbers off, as it was generally believed that they were moving toward Arizona.

At the very time that the messenger reached Wingate, a party of excursionists—all gentlemen—from Santa Fe, reached there also on their way to the San Juan valley. Among them were Judge Obed Thompson and several officers of the civil government of the Territory, besides several professional gentlemen, all of whom were spending their summer vacation in a trip to northern New Mexico. But the news of the outlaws' movement checked their gushing spirits of romantic adventure; and all would have returned home, had it not been that the commandant of Fort Wingate decided to send a party of cavalry, under Captain Rushton, up to the San Juan to look out for Red Rob and his gang. The excursionists all resolved to go on with the soldiers, and did so.

As fate would have it, Captain Rushton's party was destined to capture Red Rob and his band; while Judge Thompson was also destined to "sit in judgment on the young outlaw."

The judge was one of those remarkable Western men, more noted for his eccentricities than legal lore. He had an abundance of self-esteem and dogged perseverance, which, in a measure, accounted for his holding the high position he did; though some attributed all to political favoritism. But, be that as it may, Judge Thompson claimed the right to convene court at any time in criminal matters, and at any place. He was a strong adherent, or at least had been, to the laws of Judge Lynch, having had considerable experience at one time and another, in Texas and Arkansas.

The judge had convened a special court for the trial of Red Rob. He was not very particular about those many little technicalities and points of order so closely observed by most judicials. Nor was he at all particular about his own choice of sentences, often using those more forcible than elegant. In short, Judge Obed Thompson was a representative Western man.

In the absence of regular officers, the judge supplied their places by appointment. A sheriff and prosecuting attorney were selected from among his Santa Fe friends. He then issued a *venire facias* for a jury of twelve men.

The jury was composed of seven soldiers, three of the excursionists and two of the settlers. The former were really exempt from such duty in civil courts, but upon this occasion, wherein they anticipated an interesting time, they consented to serve.

The jury being impaneled, the judge announced all ready for the trial to begin.

No stately edifice inclosed the band of courtiers; no princely court-room was destined to ring with the legal eloquence of that dashing young disciple of Blackstone who

had been appointed as prosecuting attorney. A clump of pinons was selected as the most favorable place for the "court to sit." The jury occupied a fallen log, while the judge was indulged in the luxury of a chair, and a table for a desk, furnished by the settlers of Hidden Home.

Red Rob occupied a seat in front of the judge, and when he was called upon to speak, he rose promptly and spoke in a clear, unmoved tone, while his handsome face glowed with a half-mischievous smile.

The "prosecuting attorney" was a young man who embraced this opportunity to display his legal knowledge, as it was, in fact, the very first case in which he had been called upon to render assistance alone, and earn a fee that was not to be divided with a senior partner.

"Red Rob," said the judge, when general order had been restored, "what is your right name?"

"Robert B. Conrad," replied the youth, that mysterious smile playing about his lips.

"Well, Robert B. Conrad, are you ready for trial?" questioned the judge, producing a large meerschaum pipe and silver tobacco-box.

"What difference would it make if I were not?" replied the young outlaw.

"It is the duty incumbent upon the court to allow the prisoner time for defense. If you desire witnesses, time will be granted you to procure them. If you want the assistance of an attorney, you will be allowed time, also, to obtain one."

"I thank the court for this kind information," said the young road-agent, "but I have all the witnesses I care for; and, as to an attorney, I think so little of them that I shall forego the needed nuisance, and conduct my own side of this scrape."

"Then let the witnesses for the State be called," said Thomas Jefferson Overbaron, the "State's attorney," who felt sensibly hit by the prisoner's remarks.

The sheriff arose and called the names: Christopher Walbroke, Don Manuel Raviso and Juan Jose Vaca.

The three men came forward as their names were called.

Albert St. Kenelm was not a little surprised when his eyes fell upon the hard, cruel face of Christopher Walbroke. He recognized it as the face of the gambler who had taken such a conspicuous part in the fight at the Conejos saloon, on that memorable night, and who then answered to the name of Manuel Chicaloo. The major knew that this man's testimony would be made as strong as the villainous character of a revengeful spirit could make it, against the youth who had so often proven a terror to the gamblers and drunkards of Conejos.

Don Manuel Raviso was a wealthy Mexican gentleman who had suffered at the hands of Red Rob's gang.

Juan Jose Vaca was the overseer of a large ranch north of Santa Fe which had also been visited by the outlaws.

The three were sworn. Don Raviso took the stand.

"Don Manuel Raviso," said Overbaron, with that free, important air so peculiar to the legal profession, yet which all could see was assumed, "will you please state to the jury your occupation, the place of your residence, and whether you do, or do not, recognize the prisoner at the bar?"

"I own and operate a large ranch about forty miles south of Conejos," began the witness, "and I recognize the prisoner at the bar as Red Rob."

Overbaron gave Red Rob a glance which seemed to say, "What do you think of attorneys now?" as though Raviso's statement had been made solely upon the young lawyer's instigation. Then he ran his eyes over the crowd, permitting them to rest for a moment upon the pretty, anxious faces of Octavia St. Kenelm and Maggie Boswell, of whose eyes he believed he had become an object of admiration.

"Senor Raviso," he said, running his fingers through his hair, then glancing at his hand with a close, intense look, as though he considered the single brown hair that had been dragged from his head worth more than the soul of the boy outlaw, "state to the court," he continued, after a moment's hesitation, "under what circumstance you heretofore met the prisoner."

"Under circumstances over which I had no control," replied the witness, and an outburst of laughter followed the curt response. Even the judge was compelled to conceal his face in clouds of tobacco-smoke in order to maintain the sober dignity of the court. Overbaron never "cracked" a smile. "About one month ago," Raviso continued, "my hacienda was visited by a band of outlaws. They broke into my casa and confronted me in my library. The leader drew

a revolver, and in the name of Red Rob demanded my money and jewels. I gave him my watch, some money, and a large amount of silver plate. Then they left."

"That's all, Don Raviso—all that's necessary, unless the robber wishes to cross-examine," said the attorney, venturing to elevate his heels upon the judge's stand.

"I would like to ask the witness," said Red Rob, "whether it was in the night or daytime when he was attacked and robbed?"

"I should think you knew yourself; however, it was in the night," replied Raviso—"on the night of the twentieth day of May last."

"At what hour in the night?" asked the prisoner.

"I object, your honor!" cried Overbaron, springing to his feet.

"State your objections," said the judge, his half-closed eyes following the little clouds of smoke drifting upward among the pinon boughs.

"The question is not in the order of a direct cross examination," said Overbaron; "moreover, it is immaterial to us whether it was night or day, or at what hour, the witness was robbed."

"Your honor," said Red Rob, rising to his feet, "if it is immaterial to this court where and at what hour the witness was robbed, I would like to know what the learned gentleman is ranting about. But, your honor, I put the question that I may be enabled to prove that I was not at the ranch at the time the witness refers to."

The court sustained the question, and Raviso answered:

"It was precisely eleven o'clock, for when I handed the robber my watch—an open face—I glanced at it and noted the time exactly."

"I am done with the witness," said Red Rob.

"Juan Jose Vaca will take the stand," said the prosecuting attorney.

This witness was put upon the stand and testified that he was the overseer of a large ranch north of Santa Fe, and that, about five weeks previous, a band of robbers had entered the premises and stolen a number of horses and valuables. The leader of that gang he recognized in the prisoner at the bar, although it was in the night when the attack was made.

The cross-examination was confined to a single question, which elicited nothing favorable to the prisoner.

Christopher Walbroke was next called.

"Mr. Walbroke," said Overbaron, contemplating his elevated feet with a look of admiration, "where do you live?—what do you do for a livelihood?—and do you, or do you not, recognize the prisoner before you?"

"I reside at Conejos," replied the witness, "and since Missouri Moll got hurt I've been drivin' stage in his place till I started on this tramp. Yes, sir!" and the witness began to wax wroth, "I recognize that chap as Red Rob, the very villain that—"

"Sir!" interrupted the court, savagely, "you must remember that you are upon oath, and that no such contempt of court will be tolerated. The use of further profanity will receive condemnation—I won't have it," and the judge sunk back into his seat, and calmly resumed his smoking.

A brief silence ensued, but the stage-driver, having recovered from his unexpected reprimand, resumed his evidence.

"Wal, I know that's Red Rob—the very feller that's robbed the Santa Fe coach three times this summer. But about a month ago a passel of us Conejos boys were in the Swill-Pail saloon there, havin' a good, quiet time, when that very boy came in, dressed up in citizen's clothes, and lookin' jist as green as grass. He got into a fuss with big Missouri Moll, when ole Dakota Dan and another feller took his part, and a free fight ensued. While the fight war goin' on, he pulled a whistle outen his pocket, and then he put it to his lips and blowed a screecher. The next minute his hull gang of robbers rode right into that saloon and began to shoot and bang right and left into the crowd."

Walbroke stopped to take breath, when the attorney embraced the moment to make an ass of himself by putting a question he regretted the next moment.

"What time was the attack made?"

"Jist about midnight."

"Was anybody killed?"

"Three men were killed dead."

"Did the robbers steal or destroy anything?"

"No, they got too drunk to steal anything but lickin', and then they soon cut for their holes in the mountains. If they hadn't, we'd a' give them goss, we would."

"When did you see Red Rob again?"

"A few nights afterwards at a *baile*. He was there, and boasted that he was Red Rob, and broke up the dance."

"Was that the last time you saw him?"

"Yes, till to day."

"That's all, Mr. Walbroke."

"I will ask you a question or two," said Red Rob.

"Who's axin' these questions?" retorted the surly Walbroke, manifesting his spirit of revenge in the look he gave the prisoner.

"We're all having something to say, and I will only ask you a few plain questions, Mr. Walbroke."

"I won't answer 'em—I'll die first," was the savage response.

Overbaron smiled grimly, and inwardly wished the cowardly witness would keep his word.

Every eye sought the face of the judge. It soon appeared from the white vapor that hung around it like a heavy fog.

"Mr. Walbroke," the judicial smoke-stack announced, "you will answer all questions put to you by the prisoner—promptly, and without equivocation."

Walbroke frowned sullenly, Overbaron looked sharply at Red Rob, and Red Rob resumed his questioning:

"You say that the robbers rode into the saloon and began shooting right and left—that three men were killed; now state whether these men came to their death by bullets or knives."

"They were stabbed with knives," replied the witness, crustily, though a shake of Overbaron's head, and a sudden contraction of the brows, told him that he had committed a blunder.

"Every one of them?" questioned Red Rob.

Yes, every one of them," replied the witness, still unable to understand the grimaces of Overbaron, who, unable to stand it longer, sprung to his feet and exclaimed:

"I object, your honor, to this being admitted as evidence, upon these grounds: there are cases where none but a skillful surgeon can discriminate between the track of a knife and that of a bullet; such might have been the case—in fact was, without a doubt."

"Your honor," said Red Rob, "I hold that the question should be in order on these grounds, if no other, that a man is a fool that can't tell a pistol-wound from that of a knife."

A murmur of applause burst from the lips of the audience.

The court started drowsily from a gentle doze, and said, with a yawn:

"The court sustains the evidence."

Overbaron's face became flushed with silent rage at his repeated unsuccessful attempts to suppress evidence that was really favorable to the prisoner.

"You also stated," continued Red Rob, "that a general free fight was going on when the robbers rode in, and that the robbers got drunk. Did they pay for their liquor?"

"Who ever heard of robbers paying for anything they'd stole?" was Walbroke's reply, which afforded Overbaron an opportunity for an outburst of laughter that was dry and lonely.

"What else did the robbers do?" asked Red Rob, glancing toward the young lawyer, as though he expected an objection. But the limb of the law seemed engaged in some little speculation of his own just at that moment, and failed to put in "the objection" which seemed to be his strongest point.

"Wal, sir, that very night," continued the witness, "Red Rob's gang posted up notices on every road leading from Conejos, informin' us people that if we molested two certain persons, that war in the fight at the saloon, they would play thunder with us."

"Were these notices dated?" asked Red Rob, determined to go as far as he could from the main question.

"They war."

"What date was on them?" glancing at Overbaron, who was still mentally engaged, and at the judge, who was nodding in his chair.

"It war May the twentieth."

"I object!" suddenly cried Overbaron.

The spectators laughed, the judge awoke, and, seeing Overbaron on his feet, guessed at the truth, and said:

"The court overrules the objection—no need of argument."

"You are sure the notices bore that date, are you?" continued Red Rob.

"I'm not a fool; guess I know what I am sayin'."

"Well, then, on the night of the twentieth of last May, about midnight, you say my men rode into the Conejos saloon."

"Yes, I swear to it."

"Mr. Walbroke," said Overbaron, as an idea seemed to have suddenly entered his mind, "I would like to ask you one more question; how far is it from Conejos to Don Manuel Raviso's ranch?"

"Just fifty miles as the crow flies," replied the witness.

Red Rob turned and laughed in the young lawyer's face, saying:

"A very unfortunate question, and gives the right to cross-examine."

Overbaron looked as though he would faint. His own ignorance of the distance between the two places had led to an irreparable blunder. He did not care as much for the evidence nor what it amounted to, so that he maintained his position among his friends by displaying evidence of ability as a lawyer. He felt satisfied that Red Rob would be shot, no difference what the evidence amounted to. He knew that public opinion had already passed sentence upon the young outlaw, and that an enraged people would not allow the culprit to go unhung. The trial was simply a farce, having for its object a show of mercy toward the prisoner.

"You say, Mr. Walbroke," said Red Rob, "it is fifty miles between Conejos and Raviso's ranch. Could a man ride that distance in one hour?"

"No, nor in five of 'em."

"That's all," said the prisoner.

"That's all," added the attorney.

"Has the prisoner any rebutting testimony to offer?" asked the judge.

"None, except that already given by the witnesses for the State," replied the young outlaw, contrary to the hopes of many, who had become favorably impressed with the youth, and the calm, fearless manner in which he had conducted himself throughout the trial. His reply was, to Octavia and Maggie, a bitter disappointment. They felt certain, by the youth's indifference, and that pleasant, mischievous smile that lit up his face, that he would produce evidence that would procure his acquittal.

"This, then, closes the case," said the judge, "and I shall now submit the evidence, such as it is, to the careful consideration of the jury, without argument."

This proved a bitter disappointment to Overbaron, for if he had been a little awkward in examining the witnesses, he hoped to have repaired all and shed immortal luster upon his name in a long, brilliant and conclusive argument and summary of the evidence.

"In submitting this case to you for your verdict, gentlemen of the jury," continued the judge, "I hope you will confine yourselves strictly to the testimony, and let no outside matters or prejudices influence you in the least. You will also bear in mind that there were some confusions in the evidence as to dates, and make such deductions and allowances as will ultimately lead you to the primary truth of the whole. Do not be in a hurry. A human life is in the balance. Give the prisoner the benefit of your doubts where such is admissible, and render a verdict in accordance with the testimony that you have heard."

Having thus been charged, the jury retired for deliberation. The greatest anxiety and suspense now prevailed. Many and various were the conjectures as to the result of the trial. Men gathered here and there in little groups to discuss the matter. Some faces wore an indifferent look, others deep anxiety. Some eyes looked upon the prisoner with a light of revenge and triumph shining from their depths, others with the deepest heartfelt sympathy.

The jury was not out over half an hour, and their return was attended with a general rush for the court-room. A deep and deadly silence followed, when the judge propounded the usual questions to the jury regarding the rendition of their verdict. These being answered in the affirmative, he rose to announce the verdict to the prisoner, and the breathless throng around him.

Octavia St. Kenelm clasped her trembling hands upon her heart to still its wild throbbing, as in a calm, measured tone he read these words:

"We, the undersigned jurors, in the case whereas the Territory of New Mexico versus Robert B. Conrad, alias Red Rob, the Boy Road-agent, find the said Red Rob guilty of the crime of highway robbery."

To this verdict followed the names of the jurors.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SUNSET DOOM.

A DEEP, ominous murmur followed the reading of the verdict, and a general movement swayed the crowd. Octavia, almost unconscious in her sudden grief, was led away by Maggie from the presence of him she loved.

Expressions of surprise, regret, indignation and triumph beamed upon the faces in the assembly.

"It now becomes the painful duty of the court," said the judge, clearing his throat with a thunderous "ahem," "to pass sentence upon the prisoner. If, however, the prisoner has anything to say as to why sentence should not be passed, he now has the opportunity."

The judge sat down, and Red Rob rose to his feet, and in that same calm, clear voice, said:

"Your honor, I have nothing to say why you should not fulfill your duty in this matter; but I am at a loss to know why the jury found the verdict they did, unless they had previously made up their minds, and the evidence failed to remove their prejudice. This, however, is only my opinion, and as I am somewhat interested in the matter, it is no more than natural, no doubt, that I should think so without offending the jury. But with the evidence of Raviso and Walbroke, I can't see how they arrived at the verdict they did. The first swore that I attacked the *casa* at eleven o'clock on a certain night, and an hour after, according to Walbroke's evidence, I was fifty miles north of there in the Conejos saloon, shooting down drunkards and gamblers, Walbroke says; and then in the same breath, almost, swore that a free fight was going on when I called my men in, and that the dead had all been 'stabbed' to death. Now, why is this thus, your honor?" he concluded, with a smile.

"It is not for me to criticize the action of the jury," said the judge. "I have only to act upon their verdict, as they acted upon the evidence; and it gives me pain to have this duty to discharge. You are but a boy in years, possessed of more than ordinary personal appearance, courage and executive ability, all of which you could have turned to a better purpose than you have. You have conducted yourself during this trial in a manner which I cannot think comes of bravado, nor of self-assurance of acquittal. There is that in your countenance which is open and manly, and calculated to command sympathy and admiration. These natural gifts of nature never should have been perverted as they have been. They never should have been tarnished with crime, for to be a robber, as you have been, is to be a murderer. The penalty must cover both. A band of organized robbers cannot carry on their nefarious business without taking life, although they may have no desire to shed innocent blood. The power of a robber-chief over his men is absolute, so he must be responsible for all that the band does in violation of the laws of the land. It therefore becomes my solemn duty to pronounce upon you the sentence of death. The coming evening at sunset you will suffer the penalty of your crimes by being shot, and may God have mercy upon your soul."

A silence that was broken only by the rustle of the swaying pinons succeeded this awful sentence. Yet there was a wild tumult within every breast, which finally burst forth in a general murmur. The crowd surged to and fro. Many were the exclamations of joy over the fate of the young robber, and many were the expressions of sympathy.

Red Rob was now bound, for fear he would endeavor to avert his doom by escape. A strong guard was then placed over him. The youth still conducted himself with that calm resignation which had marked his conduct from the moment of his capture.

His men seemed little disturbed in mind by the coming fate so near at hand, for they continued to play cards, smoke their pipes and "spin their yarns."

Asa Sheridan and Albert St. Kenelm held a long conversation after the trial had ended. Dakota Dan had recommended the major to Sheridan, who embraced the earliest opportunity to make known the object that was nearest his heart—the rescue of the lovely Zella from the robbers at the old ruins.

There was something about St. Kenelm that at once drew him into Sheridan's entire confidence and respect. In his tall figure, his clear, bright eye and open, manly countenance, there was something to inspire admiration. Moreover, there was a vague familiarity—a dream-like remembrance of the handsome face and martial form of the major; but where and when these dim associations of the fickle memory had first been made, he could not tell.

The two walked out into the woods and strolled leisurely down to the river. Sheridan narrated the story of his adventures in the San Juan, even to his love in the mountain grotto.

"You are sure then a band of robbers are quartered in the ruins you speak of?" said St. Kenelm.

"There is not a single doubt of it. Zella told me they were robbers. She also gave me a history of her life, which went to prove that the captain of the gang is an inhuman monster who takes delight in torturing captives—men whom they capture in this country, and who have no designs whatever against them."

"Perhaps they are a party of Red Rob's men," said the major.

"I can not think so, St. Kenelm," replied young Sheridan. "There is something about that boy, Red Rob, that should commend him to mercy. It seemed to impress me, from the moment I first saw him, that his life as a robber is clothed in a mystery. You will find it so yet."

"I have thought so myself, Sheridan," a little surprised that Asa should express his own—St. Kenelm's—feeling exactly. "But I have never said so before. He takes it all so cool and unconcerned that it makes me think that there is an object back of the whole matter. It is not bravado. I have seen too much of such courage to be mistaken in the face of the man. But as to your wish, Mr. Sheridan, I will do my best to help you out. I will see Captain Rushton, and lay the whole matter before him, so that he can make his arrangements to go down to the ruins to-night, and capture the whole gang, and release the maiden."

"If Zella's escape is only effected in safety, then I will be a happy man. Perhaps you know what it is to love, Mr. St. Kenelm. If you do, you can doubtless imagine how I feel in regard to Zella's situation. And then there is that old man, Walraymond, and Nathan Wolfe, the two companions of whom I was telling you—if I only could find them, or know that they were safe! I never met a man that I regarded with as great veneration as I did Basil Walraymond. He was a noble old man; a mysterious old man, whose tall figure and stern features—Ah, by heavens!" the speaker suddenly exclaimed, as though a startling thought had occurred to his mind, "I thought there was something familiar about your face, Albert St. Kenelm! It is the counterpart of the face of that noble old man, Basil Walraymond. I dare say you have Walraymond blood in your veins."

Albert St. Kenelm did not reply then. He appeared to be thinking. But at length he became agitated, and said:

"I was just thinking, Sheridan. I learned something yesterday, from our old negress servant, that has been in the family fifteen years, that I never knew before. It was concerning our family. I had considered my father dead for twelve years, but from the servant I learned that such a thing as his still living is possible. I was away at school, when, for a secret purpose of his own, he left home. The report reached us, shortly afterward, that he had been shot as a confederate spy somewhere in Texas. I went out of school into the army, and as I never heard more of him, I supposed he was dead. He told Aunt Shady that, if he did not return inside of twelve years, she could break the secret to us—Octavia and I. Sheridan, that very man of whom you speak may be my father."

"He may—he must be, St. Kenelm, having assumed the name of Basil Walraymond for the execution of that secret object for which you say he left home."

Just then a voice hailed them. They glanced down the river and saw the tall form of a man, with a long, white beard, and his left arm in a sling, coming toward them.

An exclamation of joy burst from Sheridan's lips. He recognized the man—it was Basil Walraymond!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

COMPARING NOTES.

SHERIDAN rushed forward to greet his old friend, whose coming was like one from the grave.

"My dear old friend, Walraymond, is it possible that we are permitted to meet you again?"

"Yes, yes, boy, thank Heaven!" replied the old man, in that same full, rich voice; "with a broken, mangled arm, I escaped from the robbers. But you, Asa, how did you manage to escape?"

"Father!—my dear father! do you not recognize me?"

It was St. Kenelm who uttered these words, as he rushed forward and grasped the old man's hand.

Walraymond, whose attention had hitherto been fixed upon Sheridan, now glanced at the face of St. Kenelm, when a cry of joy, that was almost a shout, burst from his lips.

"My boy! my Albert! and alive! Oh, God! this is more than I had ever expected," and the old man embraced his son, and wept like a child, overwhelmed with joy.

Several moments of silence ensued. It was broken by the father.

"Albert, I thought you were dead, else I should have gone back to Missouri. I saw the name of Albert St. Kenelm among the list of killed at the battle of Wilson's Creek. But it was a mistake—it was some other father's Albert. Oh, this is joy beyond measure, my son!"

"I had never expected to see you again in this world, father. It was only a few days ago that Aunt Shady told us the real truth concerning the kidnapping of sister Octavia, and your leaving home. From that time I began to live in hopes that you were still alive, and when Mr. Sheridan was telling me of Basil Walraymond, and said that I favored him in personal appearance, I thought it might possibly have been my father, who had assumed another name. It has proven to be the case."

"Then Aunt Shady and that child are still living?" the father asked.

"Yes; they are near here now. Three families of us moved from Missouri and Iowa, and settled in this valley. The Boswells and the Gilbrechts came with us."

"I know them—know them well," said the old man, his eyes sparkling with a childish joy, as he fastened them upon the face of his son—the child he had not seen for long years. "Albert," he continued, "your face is the same as it was at sixteen, with the exception that it has grown more manly. I can see your dear mother's eyes and hear her voice in yours. And if I only had my other child, my Octavia, then would I be Aaron St. Kenelm again. I may yet find her, Albert, though God only knows in what condition. I have, after years of trailing, found the devil that stole her away and left his child—the one you have known as Octavia St. Kenelm. He is leader of those outlaws, the Phantom Aztecs. Ah, what a mockery! what an inhuman farce that was, Asa! I recognized the villain almost the moment that I set my eyes upon him. But I said nothing—pretended ignorance of the startling fact. Yes, that villain and outlaw is Leopold Hamallado, the fiend who stole my child. He may have her yet, or know where she is, and if so, I will find her, God willing."

"She is there, Basil, without a doubt," exclaimed Asa Sheridan. "I know it now—she is there in the ruins, a noble, beautiful girl. She is called Zella. She liberated me and nursed and cared for me while I lay wounded in a mountain grotto not far from the ruins."

"God is merciful after all," murmured the old man. "I had begun to think that He had deserted me—that my prayers were in vain; but I know better now. It must be my child you seen, Asa—your sister, Albert—my Octavia."

"She had soft blue eyes, fair complexion, light golden hair," said Sheridan, "and a form of queenly beauty and grace, and a soul—"

"'Tis she—my Octavia!" cried the old man.

"There is no doubt of it, Basil," continued Sheridan. "She sent me a book to read while I lay convalescing in the mountain grotto. In that book was a letter just written, although Zella knew it not. It was a cold, fiendish letter, if I may say so, written to 'My dear Aaron.' The writer spoke of a child that he had stolen—of another that he had left. He spoke of that child having grown to womanhood and that she was the image of Estelle, her mother, and—"

"That's enough, Asa, my dear young friend," broke in the old man, "enough to convince me that it is my child; but go on again. Tell me something more of my child—assure me it is no delusion."

"The name of the writer," continued Asa, "was Leopold Hamallado."

"That's the thief—the villain's name," interposed the old man.

"When Zella came back to the grotto, I showed her the letter. At first it seemed as though it would kill her. She knew, however, all about her life. The man whom she had always considered as her father had told her all a few days previous. The news bowed her spirit with grief and shame. The man would not tell her who her father was, nor where he resided. But as soon as I recovered from the effects of

my wound, she was to flee the country with me. Once in a place of safety, I was to advertise in the leading papers for her friends. But, alas! The demon Hamallado found my retreat—found Zella there. She was placed in a room under lock and key, while I—well, it is a long story, that I will tell you another time, Basil. But Zella is held a close prisoner, and no telling what may befall her."

"She must be rescued," said the old man.

"She will be, and to-night," said Sheridan.

The three turned and walked leisurely toward camp, and, as they moved along, the old man gave Asa and his son a history of his adventures in the tiger-pit, his escape therefrom, with a crushed and broken arm, and his trials and sufferings in the forest. He finally reached the village of the Navajo Indians in whose midst he received a warm welcome. Every kindness was bestowed upon him by those semi-barbarous people, and under the skillful treatment of an Indian doctor his arm healed rapidly. Still, it was not able to be out of the sling when he had bid his Indian friends adieu.

As to their young friend, Nathan Wolfe, Basil knew no more than did Asa.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"SOLD"—AT SUNSET.

As the sun declined westward, preparations for the execution of Red Rob were begun.

Twelve soldiers had been detailed as the youth's executioners. Six muskets were loaded with ball, six with blank cartridges.

The execution was to take place on the bank of the Rio del los Pinos, about half a mile from camp.

Upon the banks of the river, beneath the clustering boughs of a pinon tree, a grave was dug.

A deep and solemn silence brooded over all, for it had become known throughout the camp that the bullet which pierced the heart of the Boy Road-agent, would also crush the heart of the beautiful Octavia St. Kenelm.

But there was no shrinking from duty. The prisoner was finally led out unfettered. The soldiers formed in line, and the settlers crowded forward to get a last glimpse of him who had been a friend to them at the moment when instant death hung over their heads.

Dakota Dan, mounted upon Patience, with Humility at the animal's heels, rode through the crowd, glanced at the youth, and in silence rode on—away into the woods.

Captain Rushton was about to give the command for the company to move forward, when Red Rob mounted a stump near the head of the column, and in a clear, metallic voice exclaimed:

"Soldiers and settlers: it seems to me this matter has gone far enough. I love a joke as well as anybody, and have enjoyed this captivity and trial very much indeed; but I have no desire for it to go further."

The crowd began to gather around the speaker, some manifesting indignation, others surprise and curiosity.

"Nearly a year ago, gentlemen," the youth went on, "New Mexico, as you all well know, was nearly overrun with robbers whose haunts were in the mountains. The name of Red Rob had become a terror to the wealthy men and the stage companies of the territory. Not less than twenty of the former residing in the fertile valley of the Rio — had been visited by these robbers; and scarcely a single day passed, for six months, but what they overhauled the pockets of the passengers, or the mail-bag of some mail coach. So one day the proprietors of these suffering ranches, and the superintendents of the different stage-lines called a meeting. The result of that meeting was a resolution to employ at their own expense a party of rangers to ferret out the hiding-places of the outlaws, and capture them. Within a week after that meeting, twenty young men enrolled in the employ of those wealthy gentlemen, and I am happy to say that I am one of their number."

"A devilish clever dodge!" sneered the man from Conejos, and his words were followed by other derogatory remarks and shouts of applause. Order being restored, however, the boy continued:

"The ranches and stage companies equipped us with horses and weapons, and sent us off to the mountains, when—"

"When you turned on your employers, *a la* Captain Kidd," shouted Overbaron, the young lawyer, who had been watching for a chance for a final blow at the Boy Road-agent."

Order was restored by Captain Rushton, who threatened to arrest the first man who again disturbed the speaker.

"The first thing we did, of any consequence to our employers, was to capture the notorious Red Rob and two of his gang. This we kept a secret, turning the robber and his men over to our employers. What they did with the freebooters you can doubtless guess. But to complete our work, it was suggested that we assume the role of robbers—that I assume the name of Red Rob, and thereby ingratiate ourselves into the confidence of the different bands of robbers that were operating throughout the country. And I must say the idea has worked well. We have broken up two bands of outlaws, and caught several desperate characters that were trying to evade justice. As to our attacking Raviso's ranch, we deny all knowledge of the fact, of course. Also, the attack on the other ranch, we know nothing of. But I do know that the outlaws that robbed Raviso are quartered somewhere in the valley of the San Juan, and we have been on the look-out for them for two months. I daresay they passed themselves as the gang of Red Rob, as that gentleman's name seems to be all that is necessary to induce their victims to disgorge. Moreover, it is not probable that I could be at Raviso's ranch at eleven o'clock, then fifty miles north at Conejos an hour later. I admit the latter fact; we were at Conejos on the night of the twentieth of May; and we did ride into the saloon and quell a general free fight that was going on—or rather my men rode in, for I was already in when the fight began. But every shot that my men fired was fired in the air, and those that were killed in the witness Walbroke's free fight had been 'stobbed' to death.

"I went into that saloon in disguise, in the pursuit of my legitimate business. I had reason to believe that a band of 'larks' that we wanted were there, and so I went to figure the question out. We afterward found out that instead of going to Conejos, they went south, and were at Raviso's ranch the night we expected to capture them at Conejos. This is how one is liable to make mistakes. Those robbers doubtless told Mr. Raviso they were Red Rob's gang, and he believed them because they were robbers, and because I am known as Red Rob, he swears I am the chap that relieved him of his valuables. This is very natural of course. I don't feel hard toward him; for I know he would not swear that he recognizes in my face that of the outlaw chief that robbed him, would you, Mr. Raviso?"

"You were all masked," replied Don Raviso, who stood near the youth, his face clothed with a half smile.

"Exactly; all robbers go masked," continued the youth; "and so, gentlemen, you see how this matter rests. I will also admit that we have, at different times since our organization, attacked the mail-coaches and the ranches of our employers, but always managed to injure no one. The object in this is doubtless obvious to you all. We have taken several horses from the corrals of those ranches, but it was to supply our needs, and by previous arrangement with our employers that we did so. As to our getting drunk at the Conejos saloon, that is a falsehood—not a mistake. We drank once around and paid for it. That man, Walbroke, was there that night, and went by the name of Manuel Chicaloo. I was provoked into knocking him down that night, hence the bitterness with which he manufactured evidence against me. At the *baile*, I can prove that I behaved myself as any gentleman should until a set of rowdies, of whom Walbroke was one, threatened me. To save myself and a general disturbance, I told them that I was Red Rob, and producing this whistle, I threatened to call my men. This frightened all, and a general panic ensued.

"It was my party, gentlemen, that saved the Colorado miners from an Arapaho massacre last fall. It was my party that drove the Apaches back to their own haunts last spring. It was my party that saved the train of Albert St. Kenelm from an Indian massacre some few weeks ago; and it was my party that captured the Ruloche gang of counterfeiters—all of which has been credited to a band of independent rangers from the Arkansas. But self-praise is half scandal. In conclusion, gentlemen, permit me to say that, in order that I might be vested with the right to make any arrest, whether in the service of the ranchoes, stage companies, territories or government, I will say that I hold the commission of a captain of independent rangers, signed and sealed by the territorial governor of New Mexico. I hold that commission in my hand now, and it can be inspected by any one desiring to do so."

At this juncture Judge Thompson pushed his way through the crowd to the speaker, and taking the paper from the youth's hand, examined it with a puzzled, astonished look. Then, with a smile that betrayed his perplexity of mind, he exclaimed:

"Boys, it is even so! Here is Captain Robert Conrad's commission, with the governor's signature and the seal of his office upon it. There is no mistake—it's plain as day, and who says we've not been handsomely sold?"

Emotions of the greatest surprise swayed the throng, and shouts of applause, almost deafening, rent the air. All became wild with joy over this pleasant termination of a sad affair. The muskets that had been loaded for the youth's execution were now fired in honor of his acquittal. The report of fifty muskets followed, and to this the little howitzer on the hill lent the thunder of its brazen lung.

Red Rob was fairly carried through the excited, enthusiastic crowd, the recipient of many warm congratulations.

His men were released, and now came in for their share of honor and just deserts.

Captain Rushton apologized to Captain Conrad for the part he had taken in the arrest and trial; Red Rob took the whole as a capital good joke, and thought the apology should have been on the other side.

In the midst of the confusion consequent upon the acquittal of Red Rob, Major St. Kenelm, Asa Sheridan and Basil Walraymond entered camp.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CENTAUR.

It was some time before quietude was restored in the camp, but when it finally was, Aaron St. Kenelm was conducted by his son to where Aunt Shady and Octavia were seated. The negress knew her master the instant her eyes fell upon him, and a shout that startled all burst from her lips. For several minutes she alternated between fits of laughter and weeping, which, for awhile, threatened hysterics.

And Octavia could not have been more rejoiced had the old man been her own father. She embraced him with all the tenderness of her sweet, affectionate soul; and between the two joys, the return of Albert's father and her lover's acquittal, she was the happiest person in the camp.

The crack of a rifle out in the woods suddenly arrested the attention of all.

Several men, including Asa Sheridan, hurried away in the direction from whence the report came, and about seventy rods from camp, they came upon Dakota Dan and a stranger whom Sheridan recognized at a glance as Nathan Wolfe!

In a moment the two young friends had clasped each other's hand in a joyful reunion.

The old ranger stood leaning upon his rifle, regarding with silent wonder a ghastly object before him.

"What's up, Dan?" asked Albert St. Kenelm.

"I've killed it, major; I've killed the devil—the apparition—the Centaur—look! haw! haw! haw!"

He pointed to the body of a buck that lay stretched on the earth before him. Its horns had been sawed off within six or eight inches of its head, and between these, and to them, by means of small brass wire, was fastened a human head, that was in an almost lifelike state of preservation!

To this ghastly object was attached a mass of long false whiskers and hair. These hirsute masks, flowing down over the head and neck of the animal, concealed them from view; thereby giving the lifeless human head and the animal's body a horrible, yet natural, lifelike connection. But who had been so inhuman as to mutilate the sacred dead?—to send that ghastly object abroad in the forest to terrify the heart of man?

Nathan Wolfe's story will, in a measure, answer the questions.

"I was placed in a horrible, dismal hole in that old ruin," Wolfe said, in answer to Sheridan's query as to how he had escaped. "I was kept there several days, when that Leopold Hamallado came into my room and entered into conversation with me. He wanted to know what I was doing there. I told him I was in search of a man named Warwick. 'Just so,' replied the villain. 'I can tell you all about the man. In the first place, he and I had a little dispute, years ago, in the State of Arkansas. Warwick got the advantage of me at first, but I finally beat him

out. I stole his child—a little girl. Nothing will reach a man's heart quicker than to steal a petted child. It has been my way of doing revenge. Well, I took Warwick's child and exchanged it for another—that of Aaron St. Kenelm, a gentleman who had done me a grievous wrong. This last child I have now—a beautiful woman. But Warwick, I presume, thought I had his child yet, and hunted me down—followed me here. But I got the best of him again—well, to make a long story short, if you have ever seen a creature around here with the body of a deer and the head of a man, you have seen that much of your friend Warwick. The deer is a tame one, and we arranged your friend's head upon it as a ghastly warning to others. And now comes Basil Walraymond—the father of the last girl I adopted, and the villain smiled like a demon. 'In a few days his venerable face will go stalking through the valley of the San Juan,' and this, Asa, is the history of the Centaur. I thought I recognized the face the first time it came to our camp. Two days after this visit, I dug out of my prison and escaped, and have been hiding around the ruins ever since in hopes of being able to liberate you and Walraymond."

"Walraymond escaped the night we were first captured," replied Asa, "so did I, but I was recaptured again, and God and I only know what I have suffered."

Nathan Wolfe's escape had led to one discovery that proved a source of pleasure to the St. Kenelms. Octavia—the child left by Hamallado—was not the villain's child, but the child of the dead man Warwick, who had been slain, while in search of his child.

Wolfe took possession of the ghastly remains of his friend, and interred it in the grave that had been hollowed out for Red Rob's remains; and thus ended the mystery of the Centaur.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CLOSING EVENTS.

BEFORE night had fully set in Red Rob, as his friends continued to call him, and his men, accompanied by Dakota Dan, Asa Sheridan and Basil Walraymond, besides a number of soldiers, set out for the den of the outlaws.

When about a mile from the place a halt was ordered, when Dakota Dan and Basil Walraymond crept forward to reconnoiter the ruins. They found a great commotion among the outlaws, and from observation they soon guessed what was going on. *They were preparing to evacuate the ruins.*

The scouts hurried back and reported, when the whole party swept down upon the outlaws. A short conflict ensued, but the robbers being cut off from the ruins by a flank movement, every man of them was captured or killed. Among the latter was Leopold Hamallado, whose death saved Judge Lynch a case.

Zella was found prepared for the flight from the ruins. Asa Sheridan sought for her the moment the fight began. He found her in the room where she had been kept a prisoner, and the reunion of the lovers was one of unbounded love and joy.

When Zella learned, from the lips of her lover, that Basil Walraymond, the old man whose life she had saved by throwing him a knife that memorable night when he stood in the tiger-pit, was her father, she fell upon her knees and between sobs of joy thanked God for having sent her a father, ay! and a brother, too, for both were soon in her presence, showering kisses of love and joy upon the pretty, pale face.

The ruins were searched and a vast amount of booty found stowed away. Upon the person of Hamallado was found the heavy gold watch which Don Raviso swore Red Rob's band had taken from him. This, along with many other things, went to corroborate Captain Conrad's story—that Raviso had been robbed by a band of outlaws whose haunts were west of the mountains, and, as the young ranger believed, in the valley of the San Juan.

Securing all that they could find, the rangers returned to Hidden Home. The old negress, Huldah, and Slyly, the Weasel, were taken along.

Aaron St. Kenelm, no longer Basil Walraymond, led Zella into Octavia's tent, and made known their relationship to each other. Octavia wept bitterly, and Zella wept, too. Nathan Wolfe had already held an interview with Octavia, and had broken to her the sad news of her father's death; but Nathan spared from her sensitive heart the story of the shocking mutilation of her father's remains, and that it was his lifeless face that stared from the head of the Centaur.

Octavia received much comfort from the assurance that she should always be considered as one of the St. Kenelm family.

Each one of the girls was to bear the name she then bore—Zella St. Kenelm and Octavia Warwick.

While the St. Kenelms were rejoicing over their providential reunion, a scream outside suddenly startled them.

Albert rushed out of the tent, and was not a little surprised to see old Aunt Shady with the boy Slyly hugged up to her breast so tight that the boy's eyes fairly protruded from his head, while she was pouring kisses and words of endearment upon the little fellow.

The boy was kicking, squirming and struggling for liberty, threatening the old negress with the vengeance of "Missus Zella" if she did not release him. But Aunt Shady held on, and a ranger was about to intercede in the boy's behalf when the old woman burst forth:

"Oh, Hankie Clay, darling! don't you know yoah poor, broken-hearted ole mudder? Speak, chile ob my heart—speak out, or I'll jist done gone and die, honey!"

"Don't know you from ole Huldah," gasped the boy. "Jist you let me go, or I call de missus or Massa Shear-a-ding."

Shady released her constrictor grasp upon the youth's form, but still clung to his arm, and continued her hold, too, until she had convinced all around her, if not the boy, that she was the little fellow's mother.

And Aunt Shady was happy, too, and laughed and cried by turns until she forgot her joys and pleasures of that night in sleep.

The following morning the soldiers and excursionists left Hidden Home for Fort Wingate, taking with them the outlaws captured at the ruins.

Red Rob and his men remained in the valley of the del los Pinos several days, and in the mean time succeeded in convincing the settlers that the dangers surrounding them would not admit of a successful settlement being made. And so the little party pulled up and moved up into Colorado, where in as lovely a fertile valley as the sun ever shone upon they once more "pitched their tents;" and where they still reside, enjoying all the blessings and rewards that follow in the wake of happiness, industry and enterprise.

That same year Major St. Kenelm and Maggie Boswell and Asa Sheridan and Zella St. Kenelm were married; and if their courtship days have been dark and cloudy, those that followed have been bright with the joys and sunshine of married bliss.

Aaron St. Kenelm, that brave and noble old Basil Walraymond, makes his home with his son Albert, and is still in possession of vigorous health and manhood.

Slyly is a servant in Zella's family, and his mother in that of the St. Kenelms, where she vows she will remain until she "dies dead."

Captain Robert Conrad is still at the head of his rangers, now in the service of his country. Rumor has it that, during the coming winter, he is to lead to the altar the bright-eyed Octavia, and there consummate the vows made years before in the valley of the Rio del los Pinos. May joy be with them all.

Dakota Dan left our friends after he had seen them permanently located in the more congenial climate of Colorado. But, as regular as the autumn comes, the "Triangle" visits the St. Kenelms and their friends, and no one on earth is more welcome to their humble homes than the noble-hearted old ranger.

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